UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
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THE SPIRIT OF THE DUST

ANDRÉ CHAMSON

Among the steep and stony Cévennes Mountains, in southeastern France, a strong and simple people cultivate patchwork farms on mountainsides which rise from the ground at an angle of sixty degrees. Occasionally a valley widens, the small cluster of houses, which is a village in the mountains, is expanded into a hundred buildings—a metropolis. The mountain people possess the simple virtues, live with an almost terrible austerity, and an independence of mind, for in the Cévennes were the retreats of the Albigensians, Waldensians, and the Camisards.

Among such a people, living in such isolation, the Arnal family was the arbiter of all disputes, for all plans, for all ethical decisions. This benign and patriarchal eminence, enjoyed for generations, bred in each of the Arnals a need for justifying the people's faith. The Arnals were known as "the just."

The Arnals were tacitly proud of the aristocracy to which the people had raised them. This hereditary pride was their crime. It caused the murder of an infant incestuously begotten, and caused secrecy to become the strongest bond of this once dominant family. The Arnal clan disintegrates in numbers, the infanticide is eventually disclosed, and the head of the family arrested.

In this story of the soil, written with that French grace which produces both power and simplicity, the inexorable working of conscience attains a religious, eternal significance.

By André Chamson

ATTITUDES

CLIO, OU L'HISTOIRE SANS LES HISTORIENS

LE CRIME DES JUSTES

LES HOMMES DE LA ROUTE

L'HOMME CONTRE L'HISTOIRE

ROUX LE BANDIT

TABUSSE

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Translated

THE CRIME OF THE JUST

ROUX THE BANDIT

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THE CRIME OF THE JUST

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THE CRIME OF THE JUST

BY

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TRANSLATED BY

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PART I

THE POWER OF THE JUST

I

"If you live like them, if you follow the example of that family, all the world will respect you," my grandmother used to tell me, and almost daily I heard her speak of their honesty, as of a legend. As a child, I venerated them as wholeheartedly as did the shepherds and the wood-cutters, and when my grandmother's tales ended, my wonder used to equal that of the humble folk of the valley.

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* *

In their black suits, seated awkwardly, their elbows propped on their knees, their feet apart, their foreheads in their hands, spitting on the floor at the joints

in the planks, these simple people would crowd together, from eight o'clock in the morning, almost every Sunday when the weather was fine, on the first floor of the town-hall, in the narrow room preceding the Council Hall and that of the Justice of the Peace.

The mayor was already in the adjoining hall, with the guard, but the visitors, men from the farms and the poor quarters, came only to see Councilor

For so they called the head of this Arnal family, the master of Maubert, because, for more than forty years, he had been municipal councilor, and the title of his office had gradually replaced his baptismal name.

While awaiting him the men silently shoved one another, shoulder to shoul-

der, at each new arrival on the backless benches, worn smooth from the rubbing of stiff clothes and moist hands. Then they would lean forward to avoid the plaster of the walls and the cobwebs, heavy with dust. Beside them, the women would pull their petticoats down to their ankles, straighten themselves up, raise the children they were carrying, to their shoulders, with a single movement of the hip, and letting them sway a little over their backs, in the folds of black woollen stuff wound around their necks, they would talk a bit now and then:

"There is no one like him to get you out of trouble. . . . If he had wished it, if Maubert had not been so far away, he would have been mayor long ago . . . and for life."

"With him you don't run any risk. You always have good advice and justice on your side."

Every word spoken showed the same confidence, the same veneration for Councilor and for all the Arnals of Maubert. When men spoke of them, in this little waiting-room of the town-hall, as in the streets of the town or on the mountain roads, the least phrase seemed to become a proverb and the recital of events in which they were concerned always took on the force of example and instruction.

"They are the most honest people in the country," they said, or else: "With them the least of their cousins is worth the first of any other family," and "a promise made at Maubert is worth a paper blackened by the notary."

Such sentences, spoken in whispers, broke the first silence of the waiting, that which falls suddenly upon men who have just taken their places and are still busy observing one another. Always at this moment some anxious woman, seated awkwardly on a corner of the little bench, would begin to look through the window down at the narrow square of the town-hall. She saw beneath her the balustrade of the outside stairway, the ancient terrace of the manor house, with its wide steps and church-like flagstones; behind, between the speckled branches of the plane trees, she caught sight of the shadows of the houses, sliding over white dust, and, far below, the small, unequal paving-stones of the street leading to the bridge. To see better she would rub away, with her finger-

tips, the dust and the streaks made by the rain on the panes.

"Is he there?" the men would ask incredulously.

They were old men who had come for their pensions, conscripts who did not wish to go to Algeria, farmhands at odds with their masters, men in office who were going to engage in law-suits. Seated among them, more silent and timid, women who had come for help, for advice, to discuss confidential matters, repeated to themselves what they were going to say.

All these people awaited Councilor and in their imaginations, without ever abandoning their fixed idea, the reason for which they had come, they mapped out the road he was taking.

"Eight o'clock. He is starting from Maubert. At eight-ten he reaches the highway. . . . Still an hour."

They knew Councilor's ways and did not doubt his royal punctuality.

Every Sunday, in fact, when the season permitted, old Arnal came down to the town. The whole family followed him, but, as the head of the house, the grandsire whose blood flowed in all those who lived on the big estate, he set out from Maubert exactly at eight o'clock, alone, in spite of his seventy years, always ahead of the others.

Maubert was the last farm of the valley, an hour's distance from town. A dwelling high above the trees and grassy slopes, always exposed to view from every turn in the road, from every bridge

in the town or the valley, at every opening of pigeon-house or turret, it seemed to be the guardian of the woody solitudes of the commune, of its springs, its waterfalls and its rows of peaks where the clouds were born.

Coming out of the big courtyard, leaving on his left the paved road where the carts passed, Councilor cut straight toward the river. At the end of the lower path, below the foot-bridge, he regained the road and for five kilometres he went at a good pace down a gentle incline, his jacket folded over his arm, against his left hip, as watchful as if all the fields of the valley had been his.

The road followed the river and made sudden deviations into the beds of tributary streams. Woods, pastures, fields of

rye and kitchen gardens overhung it and sometimes covered it with long branches, or with stalks bent under the weight of the grain or the wind. Little walls of rough stones, built slanting against the rocks, kept the earth from slipping, and at places where the slopes were less abrupt, a footpath along a shelving ridge, bordered with heather, climbed up toward a farm or a sheepfold. Below the road, at each fall of the river, canals turned their bubbling water over the steeply sloping little fields, and through the open locks this water flowed down again into the grass, between the round shadows of the apple-trees that stretched their leaves and branches as far as the wall of the embankment.

Through these familiar landscapes

that seemed to melt one into another at every turn of the road, Councilor walked quickly, casting a glance at all the cultivated fields, over the low walls, across the hawthorne hedges. So as to see better he crossed from one side of the road to the other, raising his head and climbing up on the bank.

But little by little the valley became less narrow. The roofs of the town, the plane-trees of the town-hall, the apse of the church, appeared now and then above the higher branches of the apple-trees. From the summit of the last descent the whole town was suddenly revealed, with its two long streets running parallel with the banks of the river and its squares, each dominated by a fountain, rising tier on tier on the sunny side

of the mountain. Behind the town and lying wide open to the sky, the valley stretched away toward Saint-Jean and toward the plain.

After the last descent, as he reached the first houses and came to the big bridge, in the strong wind of the middle of the river, in the mist of the last waterfall, Councilor put on his jacket again and repaired directly to the town-hall.

During all this time the people awaiting him continued to follow his progress, one eye on the round clock and with the image of the road ever before their mind's eye.

"He must be at the big bend. Now he is below the Aicard's barn. He must be making the descent."

Then, slyly turning their heads right

and left, they watched one another and made calculations:

"That old man is ahead of me . . ."

"I am the first to go in," thought the old man, crumpled against the door, his hands on his walking-stick. "I am the first to go in. I made my plans well . . . one minute later and I should have been second."

"All these men and this old woman! Two hours more to wait, perhaps," thought a girl with a red scarf, staring at the women who would go in after her.

"It will take me only two minutes, salutations included," remarked abruptly, in a falsetto voice, an old man with an expressionless face. "Two minutes! And I have come the devil of a

way from the other side of the mountain. If somebody would have the goodness to let me have his place. . . . It is merely for the sake of starting back early!"

But no one answered. Each heard only his own thoughts: the continual repetition of the words he must say and the reckoning of the minutes that he would have to wait.

"Nine o'clock. Nine-five. He ought to be here. Some one must have met him on the road. Those people on the bridge have got him talking."

Almost crouching before the window, her thighs rigid, the woman continued to watch the square. From time to time her finger still slid over the window-pane, brushing away flakes of dust or

passing gently over an imperceptible spot of dirt. But suddenly she pressed her forehead against the glass and rubbed it violently with her open palm, drawing deep breaths as if startled by the sudden realization of a long-expected pleasure.

"He is coming up!" people cried.

Then the door opened and, in a moment, Councilor had crossed the room, rubbing his hands, asking the news, scattering Christian names, nicknames, surnames:

"Good-day, you! You still here, you obstinate fellow? I'm coming, I'm coming. Greetings to all of you. Compose yourselves. The deuce, Lucien, I always know when I am going to see you again."

In four steps, jostling his way, he gained the other door. Then as he lifted

the latch and gave a brief tap, a silence fell and there was always some one to say, in a trembling and comic voice, after all the others:

"And good-day, Councilor."

"Good-day, good-day," replied old Arnal, opening the door. He disappeared immediately into the other room and so rapid had been his passage that people had seen only his image which they still preserved in their memory: a tall silhouette, a narrow face and sweeping gestures.

"It's my turn," said the old man, pressing fiercely against the wall.

The waiting people shifted their positions. The men coughed, the women shook out their skirts, thrust forward their feet and polished their shoes with little rubs of their handkerchiefs.

After a moment the door opened and Councilor, leaning on the latch, bending forward a little, like a doctor on consultation days, looked silently at the gathering.

The old man seated near the entrance wiped his eyes, rose tapping with his cane and heels and the procession began.

What gave Councilor his authority over all these men was first his uprightness, his spirit of justice,—all the more uncompromising because it was recognized by all—but also his knowledge of the law.

"It is your right," he would say abruptly, before they had finished speaking. "Put it into a letter. Like this and this. You have the law on your side."

"Good, good," said the old man. "My

right, justice, that's fine . . . but if the law is on my side also!"

And, leaving Councilor, crossing the waiting-room with a sly air, grimacing with his shaved cheeks, he added, "Next one in."

Then sometimes several men entered together and Councilor had to settle disputes. Cowherds and shepherds, who passed months without seeing any one, rough, powerful men talked in loud voices, interrupted one another and faced one another as if they meant to fight with their bare fists. But before this thin, old man who, once he understood the subject of litigation, flew easily into a passion, stated the rights of the case, cut them short, and would hear nothing more, they felt their old antagonisms

weaken and they surmounted their peasant distrust of everything that makes the earth and its fruits change hands.

Thus almost every Sunday, for more than two hours and sometimes even up to the second stroke of noon, Councilor fought for, decided and arranged the lives of others.

In the bare, little, whitewashed room, where the only decorations were the portraits, above the mantelpiece, of Presidents of the Republic,—bearded men, wearing the scarf, garlanded with laurels,—there sometimes entered men who came from a distance and who, after having explained the state of their affairs, their needs, the propositions that had been made to them, asked him, twisting their hands, "And you, what would you do in my place?"

Others again, having waited until all the rest were gone, sat down on the corner of a chair and for a long minute spoke quietly, with sudden pauses and agonizing resumptions of voice, about indifferent matters.

Through the door that remained half-opened to the empty corridors, Councilor watched the clock. A current of air that came up the little stairway, from the square facing Saint Gilles, brought with it the dusty odor of this lordly old house that had become the house of the whole town and of the whole valley.

The ticking of the clock, the strokes of a pump in a neighboring cellar, dominated the voices of the visitors. Councilor, who was thinking of leaving, no longer noticed their presence and walked

about the room as if he were alone. But suddenly, after a silence that aroused his attention, he would see them lean forward, clasp their hands, stare at the floor and heard them, in a changed voice, as if the outer world had vanished, reveal some secret wound, some drama of their family or their heart, which nothing in their life betrayed.

All the Arnals, young and old, had to play the rôle of directors of consciences and deeds: people sought them out at Maubert, they stopped them in the fields. The ancient craftiness of the peasant, the pride in never allowing anything to slip by that might be useful, drove the country folk to ask their advice at every encounter, to snatch from

them some of their wisdom and their justice.

I remember that once, when still a child, I accompanied Albin, the oldest son of Councilor, on an excursion over the hills. He was the second master of Maubert, a man of fifty-five, who still obeyed his father but bent all the others to his will. He was going to count the trees for the yearly wood-cutting, in the woods without roads, without clearings, on the north slope beyond the head-springs of the valley, above the line where the waters divided.

The crest once passed, at the end of an undulating pasture, before entering the woods, on the edge of bare gravel and tall grass, we caught sight of an old shepherd guarding the flocks of the Ser-

villères farm. At the beginning of fine weather, he must have left this immense farm isolated on the very limits of the department and raised up before the cliffs and gorges, with walls like a citadel, as if it stood on the borders of a wild country. Ever since we had reached the pass he had followed us with his eyes and, divining our path among the springs, which wound like ribbons across the greensward, and the puddles marked out by big, flat stones and tall grasses, he had placed himself in our way, as if determined not to budge, weighed down as he was by his brown, woollen cloak which fell to the ground and seemed to rise about him like an embankment.

At twenty yards he saluted us, his arms held out under the stuff. Then,

with one eye closed, he asked Albin, "Have you a pencil?"

"Here," said Albin, fumbling in his pocket.

"For three months I have been waiting for one of your people. . . . It's for my reckoning . . . you know. I have watched the flock since the first of March . . . at ten francs a month, plus half a month of last year that they still owe me . . . there's a dispute over that. But good, I've told you now. I shall go on herding until October. I want to ask them for what they owe me up to May fifteenth. How much does that give me? and how much shall I take for the rest?"

Albin calculated and wrote out the result in large figures on a sheet of paper, while the old man began his story again.

For him this was a mark of the greatest confidence, the giving up of his only secret. A humble reckoning, but what else had he to tell that was not common to all men, that was not detected by watchful eyes, listening ears, revealed by hands and lips ever exposed to the wind? All his daily thoughts dealt with the earth and the movements of the clouds and beasts, while this reckoning, which he could not make alone without confusing the figures, commanded all the secret hopes of his life. So, confident but tormented, he continued ceaselessly his explanations:

"Of course I could have asked the others, those people down there. Or anyway some one capable . . . but that way you are quickly out of pocket. And

I said to myself, 'One of these days some one from Maubert will pass this way. . . . Then I shall know I am all right.' "

After this fashion, in the town houses, in the valley farms, in the solitudes of the woods and fields, did men and women think of the Arnals, mingle them with their daily cares, and like that old shepherd who had awaited their coming for three months, they turned every day toward the road from Maubert and awaited from them the decisive word, the advice they would accept as binding.

II

THIS exalted reputation had taken on a legendary character. Each of the events that the years brought forth, each of the circumstances that regulated the life of the community was linked with the memory of some saying or act of the Arnals and gave rise to a story. In time, as if wrought by the seasons, these stories, a thousand times repeated, formed sequels to one another and gradually composed a familiar epic of honesty and justice.

Thus the reputation of the Arnals became part of events and things. Always present or secretly making its influence felt, it had finally assumed, with time,

a mysterious power over the minds of men, and because of it the Arnals exercised a sort of moral regency over the town and valley.

There was, however, nothing heroic or supernatural about it. It was merely a texture of simple acts, a succession of examples for the duties of every day, or for the great events common to the lives of all men. The few recollections that were connected with unusual happenings,—the courage of the Arnals during the last cholera epidemic, the enlistment of all the able sons of Maubert in the militia of the Guard in '71,—themselves took on an everyday aspect and were effaced by the performance of duties relating to the soil, to the family, to their responsibilities as good neighbors.

This supreme importance of simple actions was imposed by the very nature of the little town, with its adjoining houses, its sloping streets, deep as wells, where the windows looked into one another from one story to the next and where everything was watched, heard, compared and judged. The surrounding country, the mountains rising in successive ridges, the farmhouses with their terraced fields facing the open spaces, as vigilant in their solitude as the town houses in their mass, also watched and listened in those wider regions where nothing could be hidden or lost and they, too, continued and amplified this reign of the patriarchal life, this consecration of all men to family and communal duties.

To serve as an example to the men of this town, of this valley, a virtue must be closely related to the necessities of every day. By surpassing them, by assuming an heroic or sublime character, it would have aroused distrust, not because of its grandeur, but through its quality of being exceptional and unexpected. Yet in the exercise of these simple duties, these patriarchal virtues, any superiority did not wound; rather it aroused admiration.

It was thus that the Arnals dominated men. By strength of will, by scrupulous honesty at all times, they brought the exercise of these natural virtues to a perfection that humiliated no one, so that men would relate, with unqualified and almost fraternal admiration, some oc-

currence where the Arnals had accomplished what every one wished to do but no one dared hope he could.

In the town, for example, they had told for years the story of what they used to call "the madman's evening." On that evening simple folk, given to scepticism and mockery, had not been far from believing that Councilor possessed a mysterious power.

Combaroux, one of those men of no trade, a knife-grinder and man of odd jobs, such as are always to be found in small towns, had put the lower quarter and, little by little, the entire town into an uproar. He was a former soldier who had been in the African infantry, who had enlisted and re-enlisted, had left the

country young and had returned worn out, subject to attacks of fever, and a hard drinker. He had married and accumulated, in sloth and filth, a miserable family: his wife, always wretched and half-stupefied, moving heavily on her swollen ankles, and boys and girls who never ate enough to satisfy their hunger, who stole in the fields and shops or, a lilliputian troop, defied their father when he was drunk and picked quarrels with their mother.

On this particular evening, shaken by an attack of fever, out of his head from having drunk and talked for hours, Combaroux had returned home swearing to murder his wife and "the entire family." For a whole hour he had been heard shouting, breaking dishes, knock-

ing about the furniture, kicking the partitions.

The neighbors, used to these disturbances, had at first listened absent-mindedly, exchanging moral judgments and witticisms from window to window.

"He is setting things in order at home."

"Oh, oh, listen to him reform."

At twilight, in this quiet quarter, beside the river that lay so still back of its high dam and between its sandbanks, this tumult brought a hint of irony, a touch of mockery at life, into men's hearts and to their lips.

But just at half-past seven Combaroux had wanted to eat immediately, "right off without waiting," as he had shouted. Naturally, in the disordered house, noth-

ing was ready. Combaroux, furious, had grabbed a butcher's knife and threatened his family, driving the knife into the wooden table.

"Once, twice, two-and-a-half times. A beef-steak cooked just rare enough or I'll bleed you . . . two-times-and-a-half . . ."

From the street they could hear him shouting, raising his voice from minute to minute, at each reply of his wife, at every cry from his children. Then they heard him talking to himself, answering himself, more and more hypnotized, more and more exasperated by the logic of his madness.

His wife and children, terrorized at the naked, glittering blade, had shut themselves up in a small storeroom, next

the kitchen, bolting the door and huddling against the wall of the airless recess. Then the madman, standing three metres from the door, still counting and shouting out summons, had flung his knife, full force, against the wood and having pulled it out, still counting, he flung it over again.

"Once, come out of there. Twice, I'll kill you. Three times, I'll fix you! Name of a come-out! Name of a come-out!"

Each time that the knife struck the door, penetrating it for two or three inches, Combaroux's wife and children shrieked desperately for help, in voices all the more tragic for being stifled.

"Once in the wood, twice in the cupboard, three times in the fat. Food, or I'll bleed you! Once, twice, three times!"

People gathered in the street. A crowd, at first joking, then quickly indignant, had advanced as far as the threshold of the house. A few men had wanted to go up, calling the maniac, trying to calm him, but, with his door fast bolted, he had threatened the crowd from the window.

"I'll kill the first who comes up! A Coalseller-Infantryman from Africa is master in his own house. I pay here, cash down, head of the house and father of a family. . . . By heaven! get out, you dirty brutes!"

And then again, "One, two, three . . . in the wood!"

In the recess, the women and children were still screaming. The crowd no longer stirred, no one dared go up.

It was then that Councilor appeared before the house. He had been passing the afternoon in town and they had intercepted him at the big bridge as he was starting back to Maubert.

"We're in a cold sweat," a bent old man told him, his hands shaking, "an awful thing has almost happened. But who wants to go up there?"

The crowd parted. "He ought to be shot," men were saying, "from a window, right through his window. . . ."

Councilor climbed the stairs softly, holding his breath. They heard him knock at the door. The crowd, which could not see anything, listened, straining on their toes. At the moment when Councilor knocked, Combaroux was at his window. With the crook of his cane

he had managed to catch the bellcord of the inn, next to his house, and was ringing the bell solemnly, marking the rhythm with his uneven shoulders and swaying his small, frizzled head which looked blind, so nearly closed were the eyes. When he heard the knocking he gave a leap: "By heaven, I'll do for you!"

Though they could not see him, they heard him vociferating behind the door, fumbling with the key. Councilor must have spoken softly, for they could not hear him, but from time to time the madman was silent, listening, no doubt.

Then they heard two sharp turns of the lock, the grating of the latch and from under the window-bar they saw a triangle of light, on a level with the

window, that grew alternately larger and smaller, showing that some one was pushing the door open and some one else was pushing it shut. At the same time Combaroux's voice grew louder, then dropped suddenly. For ten minutes, perhaps, they heard nothing more except, now and then, wheezings from Combaroux, dignified monosyllables, "Huu . . . I was right . . . oh, well, oh, well, . . . in that case, in that case, . . . Huu, huu, huu. . . ."

Then the uproar began again. Kicking the door of the storeroom, Combaroux shouted, "Come out, curse you, come out. One would think I was an ogre. God in heaven, come out, how you shame me! No? No? Name of a thousand and thousand thunders, I am going

to break down the door. Look out for the wood."

They heard Councilor raise his voice a little, without being able to understand what he said. But the other only shouted the louder, striking with his fists, boots, shoulders and head against the four walls, the doors and the furniture.

Suddenly all was silent, and for perhaps twenty minutes they heard nothing but the end of a few sentences uttered by Councilor. The men and women waited, heads raised, eyes squinting in the reflected sunlight, faces heavy with anxiety, without a gesture, without a word, without so much as the scrape of a foot on the ground.

Finally the latch grated again, steps

sounded on the stairs, and in the narrow doorway, under the mean entrance with its three unequal arches appeared Combaroux, with Councilor behind him.

The crowd began to cry out, a gesture from Councilor cut short their exclamations, and the two men, slowly making room for themselves, crossed the street and took their way to the house of Combaroux's cousins, at the other end of the town, on the road to Maubert. From there Councilor went away, without stopping to see any one, and Combaroux, vain of being out visiting, dined peacefully and pleasantly, telling stories of Africa, and stayed on, laughing and drinking heavily, but still in high good humor, until nearly midnight. He returned home very late, singing and play-

ing with a piece of wood as if it were a gold-headed cane, and the noise of his nocturnal reconciliation once more aroused the quarter.

"You're a smart little fellow, you scamp, you shall have some new shoes and a copybook. To school, to school and walk straight. Knowledge is freedom!

"You, your birthday is coming . . . rejoice, my ducky . . . it's a surprise that you need and a surprise you shall have . . . silence and discretion . . . surprises are surprises."

"What a man!" said the neighbors, "there he is now, acting like an angel!" And with their heads and arms out of the open windows, they listened in the darkness as if through a sounding partition.

"Silence and discretion. . . . Honor to the father and to the mother. Honor from the father to the mother; fifteen years of duty and fidelity. . . . Let all hear and no one laugh. . . . Hats off, gentlemen."

"For all that," said the neighbors, "Councilor caught him as you might catch a devil. God must have given him strength. . . . To put a rogue in the right way when he is in his senses is a good deal, but a crazy rogue! What in the world did he do to him?"

"They say," related the woman, "that Combaroux took him by the throat with one hand, with that mad strength of his . . . yes, when he first came in. With the other hand he brandished his knife. This was at the beginning, when we

heard him shout. But Councilor spoke to him in his natural voice . . . so softly, so softly. Seeing this, Combaroux grew calmer. When he was at last in a good mood he wanted his wife and children to come out of the storeroom, but as they would not stir he grew angry again. Once more everything was up in the air. Councilor wanted to stop him, but Combaroux leaped for him, both hands at his throat. Councilor could not have looked very well pleased, but by continuing to talk as if nothing were wrong he quieted him again. They talked quite a long time, like anybody else, seated opposite each other, on chairs. They were seen from across the street. At times Combaroux clutched his hair and shook his head. Then he would strike his fore-

head with his fists and begin to shout again, but Councilor calmed him by his own calm.

"The honesty of those men must certainly show in their eyes. The wickedest must see it, for without Councilor there would surely have been slaughter."

With time, events like these sufficed to give a supernatural prestige to the reputation of the Arnals, while in almost every family more humble anecdotes awoke the same admiration and gratitude.

For example, in and about my own family they used to tell how the Arnal sons, those of the generation of which Councilor had become the head, had been able, through a sort of divination,

to honor a promise of their father's.

Outside of Maubert and its surrounding property, the Arnals owned a few bits of ground. In the lower end of the valley they had a small vineyard in the middle of a vineyard belonging to one of my great-uncles, and for ten years, perhaps longer, my uncle had asked the Arnals to sell him this property. But from harvest to harvest, from meeting to meeting, they always put off doing so. In their hearts they did not wish to sell, especially the young men, who would have much preferred to buy up the whole country, Councilor most of all.

But one evening, on the road to Maubert, my great-uncle met Councilor's father, Arnal-Red-Cap, as they used to call him, who was the head of the family

at that time. The old man was walking quickly, with an obstinate, surly air as if heedless where he was going.

"Well, Arnal, when shall we get down to business about that vineyard?"

"We will give it to you," said the old man.

"Never mind about giving. I am anxious to pay its price."

"Bring the money to-morrow; the vineyard is yours."

The next day my great-uncle, dressed in his Sunday clothes, walked briskly up to Maubert with the money in a pouch. He entered by the lower path; the courtyard was empty, the doors wide open. In the big living-room he found all the family. Old Arnal had just died of a stroke, in less than an hour, without having appeared ill. The people of Maubert

were much surprised to see my uncle arrive at their house in his best clothes, as if paying a visit of condolence, when not a soul in the countryside had as yet heard the news. My great-uncle said nothing, went upstairs to see the old man in his shroud, and came down again, the money in his pocket, thinking the opportunity lost.

But in a few days Councilor dropped in to see him. "You came about the vineyard?"

"Your father had spoken of it?" asked my uncle.

"No," answered Councilor, while the other bit his lip, "but we thought of it. You didn't come for nothing, the other day . . . well, it's agreed, the matter's settled."

My great-uncle refused, grew angry;

the old man must have been a bit out of his head. The young men were the masters now and they had never wanted to sell. . . .

But Councilor grew angry also: what had been agreed was agreed. His father had said so and at such a time. . . . The vineyard was sold.

My uncle had to yield. At heart, he wanted the vineyard and Councilor would hear of nothing else. But great was the astonishment of the whole countryside when they learned that the Arnals had sold their vineyard, without promise given or paper signed. "That family," they said, "would take advice from their dead."

Thus were repeated, from one family

to another, those simple tales of services rendered and advice given that sufficed to make the Arnals admirable in the eyes of all the valley people. Each preserved the memory of a similar event, of an act of integrity or justice done by this family that seemed to live in continual seclusion, far up above all the hamlets and farms, in the midst of the solitudes of Maubert.

III

To the Arnals these solitudes of Maubert were merely a wild region, which it was always possible to develop in some new way. For centuries they had exploited it as virgin soil, and by energy and hard work they had drawn from it a material power equal to the moral power they exercised over men.

This high valley had always been the retreat of powerful communities whose material strength had seemed to blend with their spiritual strength, as all about them nature blended with solitude. In former times, according to the inhabitants of Maubert themselves, monks devoted to agriculture had conquered these

mountains and pushed their clearings as far as the grassy fields of the passes. In the rocky gorges are still found cyclopean walls across which they had carried roads or by which they had marked out boundaries in the forest. The sheepfold of Maubert itself, with its groined vaulting, its pillars of large stones and its cornice with two mouldings, had been an old monastic barn, and if nothing in the present lofty structure made one think of an abbatical building it was because the monks of these mountains had been merely wood-cutters and shepherds, and the dwellings of Maubert had been built only for the continual conquest of wild nature and for the time-honored watching of flocks on these sunny slopes or by these gorges into which the sun-

light slipped for only an hour a day. In this immense property, between the farm and the valleys, the Arnals, advancing pick in hand, still built sheepfolds in the midst of the pastures, still carried their wood-cutting farther and farther into the woods without clearings, and always discovered some form of uncultivated wealth or some new industry.

During Councilor's youth they had even opened the gallery for a mine at the top of the valley, and had dug and searched among the strata where a deposit cropped out. For a period, after this, they had carried lignite coal down to the railway station in their ox-carts and never, in spite of repeated offers, had they been willing to sell their concession. For that matter. the veins quick-

ly gave out and when they struck against rock on all sides the Arnals abandoned the mine and on the waste thrown up beside the river they built the saw-mill, which still runs in fine weather, when the stream is easily handled.

These primitive industries, together with work in the fields and watching the flocks, made up their life and united their efforts. About them, from the top of the valley to the mountain masses, from the hillsides covered with grape-vines or rye to the grassy or wooded slopes, from mountain to mountain and up along the mountain brooks to their head-springs, all the land belonged to this hamlet of Maubert, which was only one big farm composed of several groups of buildings, dominated by

its sheepfold, sunk into the mountainside like a ship in the waves, and flanked by its mill, which ran for two months in the year and the rest of the time served as a shed.

They never left this heritage, wild and solitary but rich and vast as a commune. Marriages between cousins brought back such as strayed for a while and none of those bound by these tyrannical relations of kinship escaped from the power of those who, from generation to generation, became the heads of the clan.

At this time Councilor directed the family as it directed the countryside. Grandfather, and master of the property by direct descent or through the marriage of his children, he ruled the

estate and was perhaps the most powerful and most respected of all the long line of the masters of Maubert whose memory was preserved without carved stone or written book.

Tall, and long-legged, like all the Arnals, he had more than any of them, through a sort of confirmation of the years, the family face: a narrow forehead, a thin nose with low nostrils that seemed flattened by quick or violent emotion, and especially a thick lower lip, full-blooded but firm, that almost hid the thin, secretive, tight upper one.

This powerful type, this mask that neither old age nor illness could break, united the family so closely and at times spread so widely through the generations, already confused by kinship and

marriages between relatives, that the country people had difficulty in distinguishing between them and usually spoke of all those who lived at Maubert as "the cousins."

However, on Sunday, when they followed Councilor down to town, they arrived all together, drawn up in rows as if in a painting and separated by intervals that marked easily distinguished ages and precedences.

The men were always out in full force, those who owned the land in the lead. Four straight men, in their fifties, with expressionless, attentive faces: Councilor's three sons, Albin and his two younger brothers, Jules and Samuel, and Councilor's nephew, Arthur. Walking elbow to elbow, their faces slightly

turned toward one another, they did not make one think of a family, of men united by blood, but of some assembly carefully chosen to accomplish a certain task, of a municipal or parish council. So strongly did they give the impression of chosen men that the farmers, seeing them pass on the road, sometimes said: "There come the Magistrates from Maubert!"

Behind them would be their sons, the "cousins," ready talkers, with ironic eyes. First the married men, two of Albin's sons, two of Jules', a son of Arthur's and two cousins of another branch, brothers-in-law of Jules and Samuel. With them were the young men, another son of Albin's, the youngest of Arthur's sons and Samuel's son, Maurice. They

all walked abreast, filling the road or street from side to side and turning back, now and then, to watch the women and the children, who followed in a confused jumble or were pulled and dragged along.

The women came down in a single group, young girls, mothers and grandmothers, all united in the care of the children. Yet one never saw them all there, like the men, for some always stayed at Maubert to watch over the house, and certain of the aged, like Lucie, Albin's wife, or Marie, Arthur's wife, almost never came to town. Indifferent to the world, persistent guardians of a wealth that no stranger had the right to estimate or see, they rarely left the farm but stayed shut up in the house,

more deprived of air and space than city women and possessed by a sort of hatred of the light, that drove them to close the shutters and pull the curtains against the sun. As they grew old, all these women yielded to the same desire for silence and seclusion. As young girls they roamed the woods and pastures with their flocks; as young women they still tended sheep and accompanied the men to the fields, working beside them; but as grandmothers they almost never left the house, and took up a new, mysterious life beside the hearth or in the dark rooms full of linen-presses.

One of the young girls who rarely went down was Clemence, Maurice's younger sister, a deaf-mute, whose infirmity made her as unsociable or per-

haps merely as indifferent as a grandmother. At seventeen, with the body of a vigorous woman, she still kept the shy and sullen manners of a little girl who is accustomed to hide away from reproof in the wild pastures or forests. Whenever she chanced to go down to the town she took a child by the hand as she left Maubert and never let go of it until she reached the bridge.

On seeing her pass like this with her wild air, beautiful and strong, walking erect, paying no heed to the carts and encumbrances of the street that had to give way before her, the country people felt a sort of fear. To them she was a being touched by a sign, something like the mark of God's finger upon the Arnal family. "The deaf-mute," said the

girls of her age when they saw her pass, —girls who worked in the spinning-mill and wore black aprons,—and they all greeted her in passing, but in such low voices that only they themselves heard their words, a sort of charm uttered in self-protection.

However, a few of the lads felt toward her one of those violent attractions that really consist of the consciousness of an identity of strength, of equally powerful vitality. But for most of them she did not exist at all and she was almost a stranger to the family.

On the other hand, the Arnals, with the exception of Councilor, varied little from one another and, even on Sunday when they arrived in town grouped according to age and power, they remained

in the eyes of all a compact and almost mysterious mass.

This was because no one outside the family shared in its labor. At Maubert they never had hired field or farmhands. All these men, all these women had their exact place in the work on the estate, and the sons of the house sufficed for everything, even at the periods of heaviest work. The Arnals brought in their hay and gathered their grapes alone, and picked up unaided the chestnuts on all that long mountain which, seen from the bridge, seemed to bar the end of the valley and, rising abruptly from the placid river to the peaks, poised its dark mass against the transparent spaces of the sky.

IV

In this solitude, the Arnals watched one another and, like men that walk at night along a deserted road, felt themselves surrounded by a thousand presences. A sense of never-relaxed moral obligation, a continual examination of conscience, formed part of all their thoughts, of all their decisions. They always weighed their actions and the most trivial deeds by which they determined the course of events. They formed these habits so young, in regard to even the smallest matters, that they believed they were guided solely by them; yet the thought of how men might judge their acts doubled their conscientiousness as would the presence of a hostile witness.

For no matter how apt to look within themselves and to follow the dictates of their own spirits, scrutinized as carefully as the scales of a balance when the weight is being adjusted, this inner examination never freed itself from the idea of a control, from this justification of their judgment by the opinion of others.

No doubt this implied an unconscious recognition of the basis of their power over men. They were well aware that this moral regency which they exercised over the valley and the town did not rest directly on their honesty but on the confidence felt in this honesty, on the respect accorded it. Thus it was that, little by little, in spite of the traditions of reflection and conscientiousness which

were their glory, they gave the judgment of man as much consideration as they did their own judgment. So when Councilor walked toward the town, along the road from Maubert, beside the river and the reeds swaying with every puff of wind, in the shelter of the double embankment cut here and there by trenches, in the delusion of solitude created at each turn, at every line of the hillside, he felt himself watched by all the men of these mountains.

In one of those mystic flashes that spring from continually dwelling on the same idea, he saw the main street of the town where he would soon pass and on every door-step were people who appeared reserved, paralyzed with respect before him but speaking freely in his ab-

sence. He saw women more concerned with the lives of others than with their own, artizans who divided their attention between their work and street dialogues carried on with quick little shakes of the head, and old men who were always free to think about others, gathered together in one of those long, secret councils that dealt with him and his acts.

In the heat of the walk his vision suddenly enlarged and included all the villages, all the hamlets, all the farms. Then he saw this small-town council repeated the length of the valley and over the mountain until he felt he was in the midst of an immense assembly where each man exercised the right of judgment.

Very often, under the stress of this vision, he would begin to talk to himself while he walked, following in a low voice a train of thought for which he abandoned the familiar tone of conversation. Even then he was answering the judgment of men, he was steadily bending to a more complete acceptance of that judgment, and never, in these moments of entire liberty, did he feel the need of clarifying his own idea of justice.

This idea had, no doubt, been slowly fixed, throughout the generations, by the commands of religious morality and of the Christian faith, but at this period the Arnals, who long ago had given up all religious observances, held justice distinct from any faith and for them it was

only a laical idea,—earthy, of the peasants—which found more justification in necessity than in hope.

But if they needed the concurrence of other men in determining what was just, they nevertheless submitted to the will of no one. The tyranny to which they did submit remained nameless and drew its strength from their own consent; for no one in the whole countryside had sufficient prestige to oppose their decisions. Neither Arnavielle, the mayor, nor a few prosperous Parisians who had retained some interests in the valley, nor the parish priest, nor the pastor who came up from Saint Jean on his bicycle and visited the Methodist communities of the valley, none of them could address these imperious and undisputed laical guides as equals.

The Janels of Bord, engineers and magistrates, who returned every summer to the house of their common ancestor, Janel-of-the-Worms, maintained with Councilor relations they would have liked to make haughty but which were actually timid. The wealth of this family went back to the ancestor, enriched by his silk-worms, who toward the end of the eighteenth century had built above the town the estate called Bord, a large building with columns and a pediment. A fanatical gardener, who cultivated the land himself and was unable to forget that he had worked out by the day for others, Janel-of-the-Worms had arranged the whole upper part of Bord in terraces and belvederes. He had died in his little palace, dressed, as in the past, in coarse stuffs and sabots, talk-

ing patois and eating at any hour of the day or night. None the less, he had sent his children to the capital to boost the family fortunes and, later, the Janels of Bord had held government positions or launched big businesses. There was always some man of this family who dreamed of being elected the deputy from his birthplace, but Councilor was the chief elector and barred out these Parisians who no longer spoke the language of the country and who treated humble folk like servants.

"Well, well," the Janels would say, with affected politeness, "here is Father Councilor, as lively as ever."

"Hou la!" old Arnal would reply, "this winter has done you no good. Your grandfather Janel used to tell mine that

it kept men young to eat at all hours when they had just come from work. . . . You ought to sit at table at less regular hours."

"Aside from that," said the Janels, red with anger, "you ought to have a fine harvest of apples this year. If you want to let us have some you can set your own price."

"I will send over as many as you like . . . as to price, your grandfather and mine never let a quarter of a centime pass between them. . . . We shan't be the ones to begin."

Another time, in the square before the town-hall, one of the Janels of Bord was explaining a plan for exploiting the mountain. "Our country needs . . ." he began.

"Our country needs males like these, who aren't afraid of oxen or of girls either," Councilor replied abruptly, pushing through the group and pointing out the long-legged boys seated on the low wall, rolling cigarettes and winking.

Moving away, then, followed by the approval of all, his arm on the shoulder of some old man, he added between his teeth, "Those people that muffle themselves all up . . . it's enough to make you sweat in winter, even on Aire de Côte!"

This dull opposition was sometimes on the point of degenerating into battle, but Councilor was too strong and the others had to yield, without reply.

Several times they attempted to meddle in the affairs of the countryside, to set up their claims and establish their in-

fluence, and each time the reaction of Councilor and the old men of the valley was terrible. Forestalled in their plans, pushed aside, humiliated, the Janels of Bord withdrew, swearing that they took no further interest in this land of savages, and they revenged themselves by playing the part of great folk . . . no longer recognizing any one and raising higher the wall about the gardens of Bord. Thus they became more and more profoundly strangers, transients who had neither friends nor influence in the land.

On the other hand, with the town Curé and the pastor from Saint Jean the Arnals had relations that were friendly but in which they knew how to maintain the upper hand.

"More people confess to him than to

me," said the Curé, as if in self-defense, "but I pray for him and the Good God will give him his due."

So when, in the midst of his soliloquies along the road, Councilor chanced to meet this little old man in his black cassock and shaggy hat, who had not lost his sacred character in spite of the religious indifference of the peasants, he would emerge suddenly from his dream and recover the sense of normal life where one does not talk to oneself, where one bows, listens, steps aside or affirms one's rights, and he would assume a little air of respectful mockery. "Were you thinking," he once asked suddenly, "of those Juliens of Grand Rue with their sick daughter?"

"You were thinking of them also," remarked the old man.

"I think for the commune and you for the Church . . . but," added Councilor, with a little mocking laugh, "sickness is in the body and is a matter for the hospital rather than for prayer."

He tried thus to start a controversy, but the priest did not feel the strength to maintain even an amicable dispute. He puffed upon the stiff, badly shaved hairs of his upper lip, twisted a finger in his ear, and abruptly spoke of other matters.

A chance memory, the sight of a house among the growth of young chestnuts above the road, gave the turn to the conversation. Good-natured, panting, telling indifferent stories with a touch of malice, he sought to recover that tone of equality which the serious conversation had made him lose. But

very soon Councilor was not listening. With his lips compressed, lengthening his stride, though still showing his respect by movements of the head that simulated attention, he returned to the subject of his daily meditations, the great pride and the great duty of the family.

Nothing diverted him from this single idea, neither men, nor cares, nor work about the place. Even at Maubert, in the midst of his sons and nephews, he managed to bring all the conversation back to it without mentioning it openly but by suggestive allusions, and each of his sentences seemed to correspond to a secret code of duty and honor.

V

Clemence alone lived in the midst of her people, taking no part in events and shut off from the cares and pride of her family. Familiar with the world though not with men, she was, however, attentive to gestures and voices and she could read the words on lips when she wished to or, even better, she could divine a thought in the eyes. But deaf, dumb, bound to objects by this double silence, she almost always seemed indifferent and resigned to not communicating with other beings. She had not, like most of the infirm, the desire to make herself understood notwithstanding, by a cry, by

a gesture, by mimicry. Long habit, the isolation of her native farm and perhaps also a natural pride had taught her to do without these illusions.

While still a child she had lost her mother, and her aunts, although they lived with her, had not been able to draw the little orphan out of her solitude and distrust. She kept almost always to herself, as if abandoned in the midst of the trees and grasses, and only sometimes admitted her brother, Maurice, to her games. But even this docile companion did not seem to draw her out of her solitude. On the grassy slopes that rose above Maubert, amid the beauty of the forest that came down to the edge of the brooks and springs, he had, like her, formed the habit of finding his sport in the silent

force of the elements and seeking his pleasures in the movements of air and water.

Later, as a diligent young girl, she was set to watching the goats and although she worked like a woman, she still seemed to be continuing her games. Without a dog, throwing stones, clapping her hands, opening her arms in sign of command, she drove her flock from the sheepfold of Maubert to the valley of Mellette. The goats stopped at the blossoming thorn-bushes, but Clemence would raise her arms and stamp her feet and the flock arrived in the valley with sudden halts and gallops.

There Clemence would pass hours by the side of the overturned beehives, empty of bees but still fragrant, like

those on the mountain. Heaps of stone, thickets of broom hid the grassy patches; high banks, covered with coarse sand and ferns, hid the gorges made by the rushing stream. Everything was withdrawn from the sunlight, sheltered from the wind, shut off from the horizon.

While she lay there, stretched out on the old turf flattened by the snows, her stomach on the warm ground, her head on her curved arms, her thighs straight, her calves beating the air alternately, she did not see her brother or her cousins who came up to the wood and, climbing the slope, surprised her at her siesta.

"There is Clemence," the men said to themselves. They would notice her bare feet in the air as she swung her long, evenly-shaped calves. The skirts of

the young girl fluttered, as if stirred by the wind, but beneath them heavy folds and shadows hid her body.

Whoever was passing, his chest thrown out from the climb, would give Clemence a tap, a little fillip with the tips of his fingers, on her waist. Then the young girl, without getting up, would roll over and, lying on her back on the ground, her arms crossed, she would laugh.

Maurice often passed by the little valley of Mellette. He might be on his way to the wood-cutting on the high plateau that overlooked the valley, or else, in the evening, coming back to Maubert by the banks of the stream.

When he saw Clemence or when her presence was signalled by a lock of hair or a bare toe outstretched and then sud-

denly curled at the end of her fluttering dress, he would drop to his hands and knees and, walking on all fours like a young animal, slender and supple, frisk to his sister's side. Then with lips drawn back he nibbled her at the back of her neck, between her round shoulders. Clemence would turn over, holding out her arms; she would feel her breath driven back by another breath, close and ample, which pressed against her face as if weighed down by the warmth of a smile, then, like the red shadow of intoxication, she would see her brother's mouth on a level with her eyes.

The powerful memories of the years linked this moment to hours that had passed. Maurice remained for her the only friend whom she had ever jostled

in common games, an almost twin brother. While still children, they had often imitated this surprise and had often laughed at it, each as if it had been a victory. At that time they delighted in games, without the need of agreeing in words; toward the end of spring they would set off together to some high meadow where they knew they would find a half-wild cherry-tree with bitter fruit, its black trunk dripping with sap. They climbed the steep slopes, their hands gripping the rocky ridges, raced through the grass and scaled the tree, its short trunk bent by the wind, and, seated astride a branch, they ate, laughing. Then they would fill some old basket with the bitter fruit and leaves and, toward evening, come running

down toward Maubert, jumping over the brooks, dashing across the meadows, to stop at last on the level ground about the sheepfold, their lungs expanded by the same tumult, their hands on their knees, panting from the sudden halt in their running, and laughing hilariously. At these times Clemence discovered a new lightness in herself, for this beating of air and blood were, no doubt, the only echo of life in her body that had grown too deliberate, cut off from the sounds of the world. At these moments she felt her own panting as one feels a bird in the palm of the hand, felt the hissing of her damp breath at the corners of her lips, the heavy beating of the blood in her throat. Bent double, she would turn her head toward Maurice

and see him shaken by the same fever and, although she heard no sounds, no words, his physical exaltation, similar to her own, almost sensible to her through her own panting, awoke the consciousness of a physical bond. Then an anguish of heart and muscles would fling her against this child whose two hands, already virile, she would grasp in her own, crush against her chest and let them slide softly toward her throat.

It was this same childish intoxication that she felt again beside Maurice on the cropped grass of the valley of Mellette on those days when he surprised her in the midst of the hives. As of old, a dizziness would make her aware of all the quiverings of life that ordinarily escaped her. The brush of air over her

nostrils, and her suddenly tightened lips, turned into a light beating, while at the sight of his stretched neck and the jaws under the white ears she imagined the restless sound of the blood. So, with her palms against her brother's temples, she gently drew toward her this face, more alive to her than other faces, and a whole world of murmurs and imperceptible little sounds were caught and fixed in her eyes in a movement of joy.

In Maurice these meetings awoke another kind of intoxication, a tender rush of pity and admiration, a magic charm born of the love for a being with whom a single word had never broken the communion of silence. Beside his sister, he discovered other ties than those of the everyday life that was always made up

of plain words and of sentences suited to action and work, of words always implying an event, an obligation, or a simple impulse of the heart. Between his eyes and hers, between their mouths also, throughout all his flesh, he accepted the covenant of a more secret friendship, as if with an unreal being. This friendship opened up to him a fantastic world, like the world of legend. As a tender of cattle, a wood-cutter of the upper forests, a man always occupied with real things such as trees and animals, he usually never escaped from the routine of his labors except to think them over again in a judicial, legal order, according to texts known by heart, like phrases of the code, separating good from evil. In all his life only Clemence had drawn him

outside the circle of his work and of permitted things, as a book might have done or a religious exhortation, or a few unaccustomed words uttered under solemn circumstances.

With his brothers, his cousins and the other boys of the valley, he spoke of her in a changed voice, as of something mysterious. "Oh, Clemence! It is not like that with her. Why do you talk of other girls? . . . You understand, she will not tell you to do this or that . . . to go down to the river or to the beasts. . . . No, with her everything happens the moment she wants it to. She does not hesitate. . . . You can pity her for being defective, but what does she lose by it? With her, who never talks, I always know what must be done merely by see-

ing her move, as if she commanded by her gestures . . ."

It was, indeed, the revelation of his own thoughts that he sought beside Clemence, on the grass plots of the valley of Mellette. Rolling with her down the short slopes, laughing and wrestling, he discovered in himself, as if liberated from their usual solicitude, his inmost thoughts concerning his work and the progress of the seasons. A sprig of juniper with its dark berries that brushed their faces, in autumn, made them think at the same instant of the approaching flight of the thrushes and of hunting them. The pinetree trunk that stopped their slide abruptly and pricked their backs with its bark carried them both in imagination to the high woods where the

trees to be cut were marked in quincunx with red darts and numbers. From the light reflected in the eyes of Clemence he knew the time and arranged to gather the beasts and return to the farm. Nothing reminded him of the ties of blood that bound him to this calm girl, but on the contrary, everything seemed to draw him nearer to her by effacing this fraternity. It was the pleasure of the games that united them—the running and resting, the work shared and the same desires in regard to fruit and harvest. Her inner life was so like his own that they seemed to mingle and intertwine like the paths and rushing streams one sees from the high peaks. Above all, it was the fact that between her two temples, as between two embankments, there was the calm

of an intelligence similar to his own and like his own in its silent movement.

That was why, changing his road, sometimes making long detours over the mountain either on his way up or down, he passed more and more often by the valley.

With time this attraction grew stronger. Clemence attained physical plenitude with the years, an air of power, always expectant, animal and voluptuous already.

VI

One day as he was returning to Maubert, slightly dizzy from the rapid descent and feeling, from his heel to his neck, the shock of his leaps and slides, Maurice chanced to come out upon the cliffs that overlooked the little valley. Thrusting his head and shoulders cautiously through the stiff foliage and the briars, he saw Clemence, still outstretched beside the beasts, who were gathering of their own accord at the summons of sunset. And seeing her thus on the earth and grass that were still warm but already close to shadow, free to abandon her heart to its fancies in this silence and solitude, he began to look at her with the eyes of a man.

A woman lying outstretched, alone, under the wide and changing sky, always seems to await and to arouse desire. And the more that he who watches her remains hidden, the more surely he yields to this silent awaiting. No witness snatched Maurice from his madness. . . .

A slide down two faults in the rock flung him almost upon her. From bush to bush, his elbows dragging on the branches, his heels planted in footholds, she had watched him leap, and had received him, as usual, with arms outspread and with a smile. But stretched out upon her, his length equalling hers, separated from the earth by this body, so relaxed that it responded to every motion of his own, he felt that he was for-

getting the sound of the human words that had defined morals and duty. All the ties of blood, customs of fraternal respect, even the very instinct that made him beware of himself with his other sisters and his cousins, all this dissolved in the never-broken silence, in this inexplicable smile, before those swelling lips and, above all, in the sense of that daily drama of work and play which united the paths, brooks, grass-plots, trees and mountains about her and about himself.

VII

Men more lax than the Arnals, less submissive to moral rules, less attentive to good and evil, would no doubt have divined the madness that swept away these young bodies. But life at Maubert observed too many rules, followed too definite a line, and the hazards of a passion that was kept fiercely secret necessarily remained hidden from the eyes of all.

Made as they were, haunted by conscientiousness, the men of Maubert were incapable of suspecting this disastrous love. Even the women, more given to questioning, through the habit of watching for signs of fatigue or illness among the children, but unskilled, through the

purity of their own lives, to divine the disorders of the heart—even they could not discover Clemence's secret.

Everything at Maubert seemed made to bury this secret: the indifference of souls that had no regrets, the solitude of the fields, the shyness of Clemence.

In this high valley, the seasons were too all-absorbing not to brush aside an event unconnected with the labors of the field. It was then at the beginning of fine weather, the heavens were propitious to life out-of-doors and the Arnals no longer saw one another except at dawn and in the evening. Scattered over the estate, they did not come together again until after the last meal, for lounging and strolling, when sleep was already master of their thoughts.

The evenings were light and did not invite to confidences. Each allowed his spirit to enjoy the gaiety of the season, the sense of well-being that sprang from the intimacy of bodies with the warm air, and from the sweetness of life after hours of hard work.

Toward nine o'clock, the sun set behind the peaks, though bright clouds continued to reflect light upon the slopes of Maubert. Mist rising from the water and the meadows spread a transparent veil over the clumps of bushes at the edge of the near-by forest. The little valleys filled with the shadow of the ravines, while between the lines of the mountain-ridges the sky darkened by degrees, in its entire mass, so that no one could tell whence came the night.

Along the rushing stream, above the little foot-bridge, on the grassy banks of the small canals that trickled through the meadows, the Arnals came to sit on the big stones of the dam.

At the foot of the slopes covered with clover and grass, in a stirring of wind and shadows, so close it seemed they could touch them, the blossoming apple-trees resembled enormous white balls which, because of their very immobility, appeared to hover over the meadow.

In the immense hollow of the valley, where night destroyed the sense of distance, these light powder-puffs seemed to float like vagabond flowers of the fields that follow a breath and carry with them our secret desires.

PART II
THE CRIME OF THE JUST

I

Men said, "We know all about that family. They have nothing to hide." Yet that very winter, as was learned later, they carefully guarded a secret.

No doubt the winter helped them, for at that season Maubert lay solitary, between patches of snow and grass, in a wide, dark landscape. Flood waters overflowed the mill-dam, the little footbridge over the short-cut was carried away and in order to reach the farm one had to make a long detour by the upper road and the stone bridge. So, from the end of November until the end of February the Arnals lived alone with their flocks, rather idle in spite of the heavy work of the season. Only at long inter-

vals some man on his way up to the state preserves, some excise officer, some guard, passed by the farm. At other times one of the cousins would come down to the town. This coming and going broke into the days and made the solitude less complete, but at this time of the year the Arnals had long hours to themselves, especially during the evenings.

They passed them, together, in the big living-room on the ground floor of the farmhouse. Seated at the uncovered table loaded with winter apples and pears, with nuts and almonds, they prolonged the evening meal as if it were a game. They peeled the fruits, holding them with their finger-tips, their arms outstretched, or cracked the shells of

nuts in their open palms. Then they would turn back toward the fire, leaning forward, shoulder to shoulder, under the long piece of linen with its blue and white checks, that was nailed around the wooden chimney-piece. With their eyes fastened on the fragments of glowing embers that rolled toward them, they did not notice the back of the fireplace where logs and small branches blazed and crackled furiously. One point, only, caught their attention, that changing margin, soft as velvet, between the coals and the embers; but they did not lift their eyes to the great, red glow and for them the hearth roared in an invisible world, just as the tempest roared, barred out by doors and shutters.

All they said was subject to the same

law. Certain ideas passed by these minds habituated to silence; thus a word, a sentence, even a monologue would be lost without evoking a reply from any one. But other words forced themselves upon them, haunted them, like these embers moving to their slow death and, throughout the slowly dying hours, were passed on from one to another.

Some of them wove baskets, with short, quick gestures varied by suddenly wide movements, and tried to become completely absorbed in this task. But the regular weaving of the reeds developed a secret and monotonous rhythm that left their minds freer and more subject to revery than idleness itself.

Others, still more attentive, their brows knit, installed themselves at the corner of a table and worked at a plaque

of copper, cut in the shape of a heart, to ornament a mule's forehead. Before the wondering children they outlined the slender letters of a motto or swelled the petals of a flower, or the cheeks or lips of a face, pressing heavily on their punches, tapping lightly with their hammers.

"I love wine, I love a rose
And my Lise, as every one knows,"

said the traditional mottoes, decorated with flowers and scrolls. And the jug, the rose, the half-drawn face suddenly created a fantastic world which gave even wider scope to revery and, through revery, to silence.

Then Councilor would take up a battered newspaper that had been read twenty times before reaching Maubert, or been picked up on some table in the

town-hall. In the deep silence of the evening he would begin to read aloud stories many weeks old, and all these different events, thus freed from actuality, took on an instructive value and assumed an importance that seemed derived from the story itself.

Listening to the recital of crimes, adulteries and thefts, the Arnals looked at one another and expressed forcibly the reprobation they all felt, hard because they were always just, condemning with the freedom and violence of men above reproach.

The outer world disappeared for Councilor, as for those who surrounded him, and during these hours of meditation and silence each rediscovered in himself the great family pride. In this

isolation, the Arnals were still aware of their power and of the thousand bonds that united them to the men of the countryside.

Like the warmth of their hearth that bathed their foreheads, the warmth of their pride became sensible to them and seemed a sort of physical well-being.

This union of duties and honors, all that was laid upon them by the wisdom of their family, their regency over men, and the very authority that other men, by their deference and their submission, accepted, all this was mingled with the evening's peaceful seclusion and the silent well-being of bodies relaxed before the fire, still heavy with fatigue but at rest.

II

One evening toward the end of the meal, Clemence went up to her room. Because of her infirmity she was the only one who did not wish them all good-night, kiss some, shake hands with others, as was the family custom. She merely moved her head, her neck extended, her forehead raised, and every one in the room said with one voice, "Good-night, Clemence."

On that day, she left while the fruit was still on the table. No one was surprised and the children played for an hour more, then went to bed in their turn. Some of them, who slept in a building adjoining the farmhouse, crossed the

court calling and playing with the gray snow.

The evening slipped into its usual silence but toward half-past ten a great cry rang through the house, a dreadful cry of stifled anguish, like a prisoned voice, the cry of a grief unskilled in finding utterance.

"Clemence?" said Councilor.

They rushed to the young girl's room. It was on the second floor at the end of a wooden corridor as full of echoes as a forest. Just as they reached it they saw a thread of light under the door, between the converging shadows of the walls. The great cry had ceased, but something was wailing in the room as if a voice had just been born in Clemence, weak but free.

Councilor pushed open the door and entered, all the family behind him.

Clemence lay on her bed, unconscious yet smiling. She was still dressed but her skirts were pulled way up and crushed violently against her breast. Her middle was bare, her thighs open and stained with blood. A new-born child lay between them, still curled up as in the maternal womb but already wailing. All the bloody lacerations of a violent and difficult birth stained the thighs, the stomach, which was beating like a great white heart, her bare feet and the child, but her two raised knees kept their pure, immaculate curve and where her form disappeared under her clothes a beautiful body was still quivering from recent pain and a rounded, supple breast was breathing gently.

"Well" . . . said Councilor.

The child stretched out, its hands against its shoulders, a sturdy boy.

Without a word, with angular gestures, Albin's wife began to cleanse it, cut the cord, wiped the mother.

Clemence, coming out of her stupor, opened her eyes, fixed them on the white wall and further off, perhaps, on the white dream of her deliverance. All about her were silent and aghast. Only, behind the cousins massed elbow to elbow, Maurice leaned against the door and trembled.

"Well," went on Councilor, "what a disgrace! A bastard now, and whose?"

With clenched jaws, pinched nostrils and chins thrust forward as if for battle, they all passed over in mind the young

men of the neighborhood, those from Terres-Rouges, those from Grand Moulin, the two state guards. Then Councilor took a step toward Clemence and bent over her, his left fist thrust forward. "Now," he said, "you've got to . . ." But, with a gesture of discouragement, thinking out loud, "How can we tell, how can we tell, with her?"

Albin's wife had covered Clemence's body. Her clothes, pulled into place, hung down under the covers. The quilt was flat, as if over a corpse. Only her face appeared above the unnaturally smooth coverings—a different face, bluish, with temples more hollow than usual, the teeth showing. Clemence's eyes still rested on the wall but more fixedly, her consciousness rising from the flood that

had just submerged it. "If we only knew!" muttered one of the cousins, between his teeth, with black looks.

Heedless of the child who, lying on the narrow table, was in danger of falling, they all thought of the father, of the man who had brought about this shame and, even more, of the shame itself. In their eyes, Clemence was now nothing. They forgot her as they thought of the dishonor that had fallen upon them, as, only a short time before, thinking of their reputation for integrity, they had forgotten themselves and their acts, in remembering this spiritual and common bond.

Then, in the midst of the silence of the whole family, Clemence turned her head. Her eyes met those of Maurice and

a smile curved her lips. It swelled like a sheet of water over a spring, her lips parted and about the white teeth, with their sensitive gums that seemed partially to reveal the secret of this tormented body, a kiss formed. It seemed to rush through space to meet an offering responding to its own, and before the eyes of all the suddenly alert men and women, the eyes of the deaf-mute spoke.

In a great rush of anguish they looked at Maurice. Standing by the door, trembling in all his limbs, Maurice looked at Clemence. "You?" said Councilor, "with your sister!"

"With his sister. . . . A man of our blood!"

Suddenly Albin's wife rushed fran-

tically to the child. She took it in her arms, naked, rolled carelessly in a shawl, and already so blue with cold that it no longer cried. All the men went out behind her. Maurice alone stayed on in the room and slowly, step by step, approached the bed where Clemence lay. . . . When the last of the cousins had shut the door he flung himself upon her, his arms outstretched, the palms of his two hands pressed against her face, as he had used to do on the old grass-plots on summer days.

III

THE family gathered in the big room, about the child which Albin's wife had laid on the table. The men leaned over it and stared as they might have stared at a trophy of the hunt, their gaze brutal, but somehow helpless and beaten.

"The first stain," said Councilor, "and the worst of all. People will say, 'Look at those Arnals, upright before the world and secretly worse than the basest of the base. . . .' Ah, but if that's the case I shall no longer go outside Maubert; let the snow and water cut us off from all the world and let me die in my courtyard. . . . You can see me now, can't you, in the Communal Council! I, Ar-

nal! Debts, a relative that shames you before the valley, all that is nothing. But a disgrace like this in a family like ours! Men will say . . . they will say . . .! And the child will grow, he will grow up with the others. There are faults that can be forgotten; men may talk about them but nothing brings them before your eyes. But this . . .! And then at school: 'Base-born, little bastard, poisoned child!' The children will follow him up here, flinging stones at him. We shall have to see that, to hear that! Ah, what misery! . . . And he lives. He might have been born dead, stifled by shame, strangled by honor!"

In the warmth of the hearth and of their breath the child stirred, raised its arms, curled up and breathed in the

warm air through its mouth. They all stood in a big circle about it. Councilor, his back to the flames, his shoulders drooping, roared like the north wind. . . . "They will laugh at us, those who feared us like the law! The loose girls of the town are going to say now that our girls have no need of lovers on the farm. 'They take their pleasure at Maubert, those virtuous Arnals!' God in heaven! 'A love-child,' they will say! And everything else, all our strict honesty—we haven't picked up a chestnut on the road for many lifetimes, not since there have been Arnals on this mountain—all that will not be worth a song. 'Good-for-nothings. Sleep-with-your-sisters-and-all-the-family . . .' I, I and you . . . the rest of you, with our relations, our

legitimate children begotten in the beds of the house and not under the bushes. God in heaven! Councilor in the Communal. . . . A family that votes for senators, a family that could have ruled the whole countryside for the King or the Republic—of course for the Republic—merely by saying 'That is right. Do it.' Men like us. . . . Then shame for sixty years, shame that lives as long as a man . . . and you live to be old, with our blood, even when it is diluted with the blood of others! And in any other family a child like that would have died at birth. But he lives, God in heaven! . . . It would be better . . ."

Then Albin's wife began in a lifeless voice, "And the families that are related to yours? What about my people, and

Marie's?" . . . "And our own family," shouted Councilor, "neither I nor Albin nor the sons or grandsons, but the whole family. . . . The Arnals of Maubert. . . .

"If he were dead," went on Councilor, in a lower voice, "if he had died at birth, all could be hidden. We should keep the secret, the family secret, all together. He would be buried up there, behind the big sheepfold. No one would have seen him or heard of him and we should still have our honor. But this way, the whole world will know about it! People will talk about us for six months without stopping, for a year, for a man's lifetime. They have never been able to say anything but good of us, but now everything changes all at once. It will give weapons

to all the wicked in the valley! . . . 'Just look at all those virtuous folk! We don't set ourselves up as examples, but, with us, brothers don't get their sisters with child. . . .' It's the defeat of honesty. . . . We ought to have the right . . ."

Standing shoulder to shoulder about Councilor, the father and master, as on the days of great ceremonies such as funerals, marriages and anniversaries, their hands gripping the edge of the table, they formed a great mass animated by a single passion. No one dared speak, but the grandfather spoke for them all, and this fury that shook him, this fierce obsession in regard to the opinion of others, that directed his words and raised his voice, gripped them also.

Even more than the meaning of his words, Councilor's cries, his oaths, his abrupt silences, shook them and exasperated this fury. It exasperated them most when they met, in one another's eyes, the thought, made of lightning and tears, that was driving them all mad. And the child under its black woollen shawl, by a cry, by a sob, prevented them from ignoring this thought.

"Don't you think so, the rest of you?" went on Councilor, "don't you think so? If he were only dead, no one would know anything. . . . Ah, no, ah, no! And yet . . . think! If yesterday we had said, 'Do this, do that,' who would have said a word against it? But to-morrow, just wait and see! I might speak in the Council, on that matter of the water, of the

fountains. . . . When I said, 'No, not like that. That is for the benefit of ten as against the interests of a hundred!' . . .'And what about the interests of those who get their sisters with child?' Always the same thing. . . . Worse than a bastard! Yes, I tell you. He might have died. It would have been better if he had . . . For him . . . For the sake of honesty. Yes. . . . But look at it, it is alive. It cries like a man. . . . Look, look, it breathes. Touch it, see, feel the air under its skin. The air passing. And the heart . . . the heart. There the life is, in his heart. Touch, see. . . . Ah, what misery!"

Staring blankly, his face drawn and tear-stained, Councilor repeated the same words over and over, and the women's

sobs answered his own: "He lives. . . . Touch, see. Touch, see. . . . Feel his life. . . . In his heart. Ah, heavens!"

But suddenly words failed him. He no longer found even those that he had repeated ten times, and only his sobs, strangled from moment to moment in his throat, measured the silence.

Then they approached the corner of the table where the child lay. Bending over him, as if to crush him with their weight, they stretched out their hands, laid them on the black shawl, pressed on the little body.

"The air passing under the skin . . . and the heart, the heart there . . ." went on Councilor, in a panting voice, with sudden explosions that seemed like bursts of laughter.

And all furiously pressed and fingered this life, touched this heart, followed the rhythm of this breath. At each of Councilor's words, fingers pressed, strong hands gripped as if to stop this imperceptible movement made of air and mysterious blood, and each, thinking he felt it slide under his fingers, pinched the flesh.

But then, high on the wooden stairway, seeming to echo in their feverish heads, a step came toward the room, thumping on each stair, feeling its way in the darkness and striking loudly against the door.

"Maurice!"

With a single movement they drew together in a line, facing the door, their

backs to the table, hiding the black shawl under which lay the child.

Maurice opened the door and said, without coming in, "She has fainted. You are not going to leave her . . ."

Two women, Marie and Jeanne, moved toward the corridor. To let them pass, Maurice stepped into the room. Then, his hands hanging limply, he looked at the family. "Think . . ."

"Be still," said Councilor, "what can you say? Nothing concerns you. You are no longer anything . . . you will leave to-morrow . . . you have nothing more to do with Maubert. Leave the country. We will give you enough to take you away and you will go to work. There is no longer any of the inheritance for your hands. We are the masters. Now go."

"But the baby, the child?" asked Maurice.

"Go!" shouted Councilor. "It is no concern of yours. Go, and don't come back. We will do what is necessary."

And this violence, supported by the mute violence of them all and shown by their looks, their clenched fists, their dry lips, suddenly broke the young man's will. He left the room, closed the door noiselessly, as if to disappear at once, and, still noiselessly, went upstairs followed by the creaking of the wooden boards, which seemed to creak from the wind and the movements of the centuries rather than from the steps of a man.

IV

THEN they turned back toward the table. Councilor lifted the shawl and the child's body appeared. It looked hard, not motionless but stiffened, and it had the fragile, blue color of thin ice. Under their outstretched hands also the flesh felt cold, and it remained white where the fingers pressed it.

A stupor of awe and fear paralyzed the breath of all bending above the little blind face and the silence froze their bowed heads in an attitude that it seemed they would hold forever.

But Councilor, stronger than the silence, said in a dull voice, "Go out, go

out. Leave us now. Albin, stay. The rest of you, go and sleep."

The two heads of the family remained alone in the room. "Behind the big sheepfold," said Councilor.

Albin unhooked the lantern, lighted the wick and wiped the panes carefully. Meanwhile Councilor wrapped the child's body in the shawl. Then he slid it, in its woollen shroud, into a narrow sack that had held sulphur for the vines, and closed the sack by a large knot in the cord, which he tightened with his teeth.

Lantern in hand, Albin was already waiting at the door. Councilor took the sack in his hands, Albin lifted the lantern up to the lock and the entire room

fell into darkness. As they looked for the key and the latch their gestures flung long shadows into the darkness, but these gestures remained simple, like those they made every day, without haste or time lost.

With the door open, the light bobbed across the dark courtyard, growing fainter as it went farther, and in it each sprig of grass or wood upraised its own image in motionless hoarfrost. Beyond the frozen mud of the enclosure that rose in a gentle slope, the façade of the big sheepfold cut off the play of light.

Sliding and breaking through the ice, father and son skirted the sheepfold. A steep path, where roughly-squared logs served as steps, led to the plateau against which it backed. The two men

stumbled over the frozen wood on this slope where the pebbles, fast in the ground, no longer rolled. Albin walked ahead, holding the lantern low, close to his knees, and letting a triangle of light fall behind him, in which his father walked.

At the top of the path, at an angle in the wall, was a heap of tin and wooden boxes, the débris of the purchases made in town. Councilor turned over the clattering pile, took out a strong, narrow box, laid the sack in it and, adjusting the cover at the four corners with the palms of his hands, drove in the few nails that remained.

Then they advanced with careful steps along the north wall of the sheepfold—a wall without a window, half-

buried in the ground—no longer lighting their steps over the slippery earth but exploring the shadows among the grasses, in the angle of the wall. Between two little hummocks they set down the lantern, then the box. Councilor tapped the ground with his foot and said, "There."

Albin picked up the lantern and rounded the sheepfold, almost at a run. Councilor, left alone beside the box, which he touched hesitatingly now and then with the tips of his fingers, felt the shock of the night like a gust of wind in his eyes. He could make out nothing in the darkness, but the diffused, murmuring, far-off, of waters and leaves recreated immensity behind that motionless screen. The old man, crouching

there, felt his fingers tremble on the edge of the box, while, with his shoulders arched as if to beat back this trembling that threatened to seize his whole body, his alert ears caught all the sounds moving through space, and as if to conquer a sudden, constantly aroused terror, sought to pierce their mystery. . . .

But all the murmurs of brooks and forests, as well as the sighings of the wind, were suddenly and inexplicably mingled, and his terror reigned supreme, attentive merely to the sharp tapping of his fingers, which he could no longer take from the little echoing box.

However, Albin had returned with the picks and the two men set to work to dig into the ground, close to the wall, between the hillocks. At first, frozen

clods of earth came away, with clumps of pale grass; then a light soil that sent up a faint mist before the lantern. The hole was being sunk against the buried wall, close to the foundation of big stones, and while it grew deeper the night seemed to hang motionless, apparently just as cold, as overcast as ever, the wind wailing in the distance. But time was measured by the breath of the two men and already, without anything to announce it in the sky or on the peaks, dawn was near.

Both men were now flat on their stomachs on the ground, crushed by the silence. But suddenly the iron pick struck against the rock like a signal. Then, stiff and groaning, Councilor turned over on his elbows, pulled the

box toward him and slid it to the edge of the hole. Albin, leaning far down with it, his fingers bleeding, placed it on the bottom without dropping it.

At night, earth falling upon earth makes only the sound of the elements stirring of themselves. The nearest breeze scatters it over the grassy slopes, but an echo leaped from the rocky wall, to the right of the valley of Mellette, at the thud of four feet stamping down newly-turned soil. . . .

Albin went back first, swinging the lantern with wide, dazed gestures. Once more Councilor remained alone in the darkness. He went on stamping obstinately on the filled grave that was already on a level with the surrounding earth and as hard as it. Then, falling on

his knees beside it, he replaced the clods of grass and ice. From the edge of the roof, water trickled slowly down over the wall and froze again on the soil. He caught it in his open palms and with the tips of his fingers pressed it into the cracks in the ice that the night was already closing over again. In the icy calm that precedes the dawn, this crouching man seemed laboring to remove every trace of where the earth had been opened and filled in again.

At the tips of his shivering fingers the trickling water froze into little artificial fingers. Everything seemed to recall the burial of the small corpse, and terror was born again in the heart of this man alone in the dark, this man who felt himself tied to a terrible event, for this night

and for his entire life. He felt as if nothing any longer could mark off or set a limit to the passage of time. No sound seemed to end or to be born again in a minute or an hour, not even the sound of the wind and of the water. All around Maubert he heard only the noise of stirrings that nothing in space limited and that set no limit to the duration of things. . . . Like them, the movements of his despairing heart seemed as if they would never cease, and to follow them, to hear them better, Councilor crouched upon the ground as a wounded man huddles over his wound to hide the blood. . . . So he huddled his body about his obsession and his remorse. When he rose, the appearance of the world was already changing above the peaks. Everything

that the darkness for hours had blended stood out in distinct, opposed masses, and sharp lines marked out the shapes of the mountains that were drawing away from the sky.

PART III

THE JUST BEFORE THE WORLD

I

One morning as he was rousing from sleep, his eyes fixed, his body still motionless and seemingly indifferent to his thoughts, Councilor saw opposite him, through the high, unshuttered dormer-window cut in the wall, a blue abyss. Then, with a fit of trembling that raised him up abruptly in bed, his hands gripping the foot-rail, his head lifted toward the strange, new sky, he understood that winter was ended.

The snow, clinging to the ground, still came down to the roads, but running water flowed across the dark fields and, from the window which he had just opened, Councilor looked out at the valley that, in the growing light, seemed

to be drawing nearer to the barns and houses of Maubert.

In the hollow through which the river slipped away, nothing resembled the days just past. Every moment a new reflection of light upset the relations established in space between the inhabited parts of the valley; a man crouching in a garden, a doorway, a floor for threshing wheat detached themselves abruptly from the distance and seemed to move into the foreground close beside the pastures of Maubert.

On this morning of thaw and wind it seemed as if their solitude, also, began suddenly to crumble. Like the snow and the clouds, it melted in the sun and the morning breeze. A clearly visible landscape, in which everything seemed

near-by, closed in on Maubert. Along the road above the bridge, jumping over the puddles and keeping to the high parts of the road, a man was walking.

Still in his nightshirt at the window, his shivering legs bare in the cold air, Councilor watched with amazement this rush of the world and of men toward his house. It seemed to him that the passer-by along the road grew larger every moment until he dominated the landscape; and this man, magnified by the play of light and the clearness of the atmosphere, who walked along indifferently, his spade over his shoulder, became for him the advance guard of an immense crowd marching toward Maubert.

II

From that day, the Arnals fought against the spring. They hesitated to go down into the valley, to pass by the farms, and they never appeared in groups in the streets, as they had used to do. They seemed to have grown wild in the bad season, to have lost, during four months of isolation, the habit of seeing other men.

After having sacrificed conscience itself to the moral supremacy they had won, all they now desired was to live by themselves in the midst of that still intact supremacy, as in the midst of a memory. During the latter part of the winter, driven back upon themselves,

indifferent to others, they had lived thus in the despairing pride of having lost their taste for action by saving their honor. They had secretly wished that the bad weather might be prolonged, that the solitude brought by the snows, the floods and the north winds, might cut them off forever from the valley and the town.

Nevertheless, the season more and more overcame their distrust and forced them to resume a common life. Too much masters of themselves to risk arousing suspicion by yielding completely to their desire for solitude, they conquered their embarrassment and submitted to meeting others. In public, nothing in their words or gestures betrayed their secret, but to themselves it

seemed as if each meeting invited a confession.

Maurice had left Maubert long before. He had gone to Marseille with some money in his pocket, without meeting a soul either on the farms or in the town. For the first few weeks he had sent them postcards, scraps of letters: "I am working at carting, driving the horses. . . . I can earn enough now to live here."

At Maubert, Councilor passed these cards on to the older members of the family, to Albin, to Arthur and, in order of age, to Samuel, Maurice's father. The men read, then lapsed into silence, until one of them would decide to throw the card into the fire. No one answered Maurice. "We will write to

you once a year," Councilor had told him the day he left, and they all thought of the next year and of the reply they would have to make then to these submissive, respectful cards, begging for news.

Maurice's departure had astounded the country-folk. He was the first who had ever left Maubert. Never had a young man of the family gone to work in the city. So the men of the valley sought opportunities for meeting the Arnals to question them about his absence. Crossing the sloping fields running with water, taking short cuts through the hawthorn hedges and apple orchards that were just bursting into bloom, they would surprise Albin or one of the cousins in the midst of their work. "What

about Maurice?" they would ask. "Is he coming back?"

"Oh, he is following his fancy. He has had a taste of the city; he will do as he likes now."

"Well, well," the man would say, "this must be the first time. . . . Well, well! It's an odd fancy. When and how did he get the idea of going away?"

"Just an idea of his, an idea, like any other. . . . How can you tell, with young men?"

"He didn't get himself into a mess, did he? Some young man's piece of folly? . . . Of course, of course. No, there was no need of that. Just an idea, then . . ."

Albin would hasten to speak of other matters, of the weather which was cloud-

ing up, of the dampness of the earth, of the seeds that were rotting. . . . Then he would quickly make his escape, plunging into the labyrinth of fields and canals, sheltered by walls of white blossoms and thorns.

The neighbor would remain thoughtful, astonished, one hand to his ear, the index finger in his hair, nodding his head and body, but without suspicion and repeating in a low voice, "Just an idea, an idea like any other . . ."

But with the Arnals these questions gave birth to a silent anguish, from which they could not escape. It deepened their desire for solitude and their determination again to save the moral authority of the family by isolating that family from others.

Never did they confess the strength of this anguish to one another, but they all felt it . . . in the very midst of their work, though most strongly in their hours of solitude.

In the morning when they awoke from sleep it preceded every other thought. It weighed on their lips and eyes like some too heady wine drunk the night before and made more potent by the night's dreams. They could not overcome it or escape from it by a quick awakening. Their habit of rising at daybreak, the light dawning at the window, the shadows of furniture and curtains, that phantasmagoria of returning day, helped them to maintain it, in a half-conscious state, and it was only when the sun, well above the horizon, shone di-

rectly in their eyes that they leaped from bed and forced themselves to think of other things. . . . But throughout the whole day, like half-awakened men, they were haunted by the anguish of dawn and lived in fear of the coming night.

III

But even more surely than the new season, their family duties forced the Arnals to see other men.

One morning, the apparitor of the commune, an old man with a red face and a chapped, pimply nose who ceaselessly reminded every one that he had been in Councilor's class, arrived at Maubert with a letter from the mayor. Without giving Councilor time to open and read it, he began to explain his visit. "Well, now, they're asking for you . . . the mayor and the rest. It's a matter of law, an accident, a bad business, so to speak. . . . In short, you must come down at once. They will explain

down there. . . . That Pantel . . . I always said so! You could tell it would happen."

The apparitor wore a military cap of dark green with a bright cord. He took it off, tapping the warped visor and speaking in jerks. Councilor, unnerved, stared at him, shook his head, tried to unseal the letter. Finally he asked, "Has the guard got into trouble?"

"Oh, yes. It's all in the letter, as I said. . . . A revolver-shot, three in fact, at Simon's son. . . . He hadn't any right . . . the other was doing no harm . . . but they have quarrelled with each other for a long time, over a matter of wood . . . and they say also about a girl. . . . So the Council want to know what they must do and they sent

me to tell you to come down. Read the letter. It's all there."

"It's only," faltered Councilor, "it's only that . . . this morning!"

The apparitor had stopped his tapping and, grabbing the visor, he pulled the *kepi* down to his ears which stuck out and turned scarlet.

"Well," said Councilor, "then I must go."

"They wouldn't know what to make of it if you didn't," said the old man, taking off his *kepi* again. "They are all waiting for you."

Those who had not yet set off for the fields had gathered before the door. Councilor did not stir. The Arnals stared at the apparitor, who wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"He must drink a glass of wine first," said Lucie, moving back into the room.

"Just a mouthful," the apparitor called after her, "but it mustn't delay us."

Albin pushed Councilor into the house. Lucie returned with a bottle and some glasses, and while the men drank, Councilor opened an upstairs window and called down, "Go ahead, and tell them I am coming. I will overtake you."

"Very well," said the old man, somewhat put out, "but they didn't doubt that. . . . If I must go, I go."

The two men followed each other along the road, five hundred metres apart. Councilor, jealous of his solitude, would stop a little when on rounding a curve he found that the other had

lost some of his lead. "Always me," he thought, slowing his steps. "What do they want with me now? What do you think? What is there to be done about it? . . . After all, they could have got along very well by themselves!"

But a few metres farther on, resuming his normal walk, his ample stride, that bending of the legs in which his whole body seemed to share, he thought, "That Pantel is a wild fellow. I said so when he was appointed guard. . . . But they had so many good reasons! His military service, his sick mother . . . and his father was a fine man! But if they had listened to me we shouldn't have had this affair to-day. I'm going to keep a sharp eye on them now." But when above the low wall, skirting the road, he

caught sight of the squat figure of the apparitor, his little dark cap and the flash of the silver cord, Councilor stopped in his tracks and grumbled, "They will never leave me alone! They might get on without me, at least for once!"

As he entered the town, in the narrow street that preceded the bridge and crossing the bridge, Councilor suddenly felt more sure of himself. There was no one on the door-steps, no one on the bridge, no one in the angle of the wall where the sun shone. This solitude was calming and Councilor recovered his usual poise and resolution.

So at the town hall he ran up the short flight of stairs and pushed open the door without knocking. Arnavielle, the mayor, the two deputies and two other

councilors were in the room, talking with the apparitor.

"Ah!" said the mayor.

There was a moment of silence while the men shook hands, then Councilor sat down at the table.

"Our guard," said the mayor, "has got us into a nice mess. That Pantel! He has shot Simon's son. One bullet in the ground and two in the stomach. And without reason. He says it was in the course of his duty. Duty indeed! . . . It was in a quarrel over some wood. . . . And now, what are we to do? Have him arrested? You know what a scandal that will be for the commune. After all, he is our guard . . . and yet!"

"When did it happen?" asked Councilor.

"At seven this morning," answered Combet, the first deputy. "We are neighbors, you know, and I was one of the first to see it. Well, at six o'clock Simon's son went up to cut faggots in a wood he has above the Prés. Pantel watched him. For months they have quarrelled over that wood. Simon cut just above the stream. Pantel claimed that the brook marked the boundary and that the land above belonged to him. Well and good. When his faggots were cut, Simon came down again. Pantel lost sight of him in the woods. He must have grown furious tracking him through the brambles, but in a moment he came running down and caught up with Simon in front of his house. From then on I saw everything, I was close by. 'You cursed thief!' cried

Pantel, 'I saw you beyond the stream, in another man's wood. You'll see with whose wood I'm going to warm myself. Just wait till I get even with you!'

" 'You make me sweat,' said Simon. 'Go and howl farther off if you want us to feed you.' And then arguments. . . . 'I'll have the law on you,' cried Pantel. 'And by what right?' asked the other. 'By the right I have to hunt down scoundrels.' Then Simon dropped his faggots, raised himself up and I cannot say whether or not he made a step toward Pantel, for it happened quicker than I can tell it: bang, bang, bang! three pistol-shots, and I saw Simon whirl and fall to the ground like a sheep. . . . We carried him into his house. The doctor has looked at his stomach and doesn't seem very hopeful. . . ."

"And the other?" asked Councilor.

"The other? We have locked him up below. He was raving like a madman. Took out his note-book to write, 'I take my oath he threatened me. It was in lawful self-defense. . . . He could have killed me with a single blow. If you want a guard, allow him to defend himself, or else all the robbers will be masters.'"

"Anything else?" asked Councilor.

"Yes . . . that wasn't the only reason, that bit of wood. They were both making love to that girl of the Aubrets' . . . 'the Spaniard,' as they call her. One evening and not the next. One each. But that enraged them and they hated each other as if one had prevented the other from having her."

"Well," said Combet, "she screamed

loud enough after it happened. They heard her up there at Côte des Prés. 'They have killed him . . . my support! . . .' and words . . . and details . . ."

"A lot of filth," said Councilor . . . "but it makes no difference, he had no right to shoot. . . . Was the other armed?"

"No, indeed," said the deputy, "but, you know, Simon is a bull all right. Pantel spoke that much truth. He could kill you with one hand. But you can't fight like that and, besides, Pantel could have gone away. . . . No, he did a bad thing, and now he tells any tale he pleases."

"Yes," said the mayor, "he is a good-for-nothing. We did wrong to give in to

his lamentations. We could have found other guards. . . . But there you are, not a cent, a good family, his sick mother, his military service. . . . How did he ever manage to become a sergeant? A nice mess! But that's not all, now we must do something about it. If only it were not serious . . . We could dismiss him after a time, without having it injure the commune. Because, after all, a guard . . . it's a little like the commune itself, it's a little like the Council. If there is a scandal, we shall all share in it."

The men of the Council approved, tapping with their fingers on the edge of the table.

"So then you think we had better not bring the police into it?"

"Perhaps."

"After all, yes," said the apparitor.

"God in heaven!" cried Councilor sharply. "You would hide the sins of the devil himself, if he lived in the district. You arrange it to suit your convenience. It isn't a question of inconvenience or scandal. . . . A man shoots another, without ground; that must be paid for! Guard or no guard! If it were the mayor, if it were myself . . ."

But as abruptly as he had begun to speak he now broke off the words in his teeth, crushed back the sentences. He had barely mentioned himself when, with eyes fixed and staring, he placed his hand over his mouth as if to blot out his words, with the gesture of a man warding off an attack.

But so strong was his authority, that the others had already yielded to the violence of this judgment that reversed their own.

"Well," said the deputy, "we are here to see both sides."

"That might not be the worst thing to do."

"Then you want me to notify the police?"

"I?" said Councilor, starting, "I?" But though his body slumped and his head sank between his shoulders, he managed to recover his self-control. Forcing himself by the very strength of his muscles and hammering out the words, he answered, "Yes . . . what I said . . . you can't do anything else. What I said must be done."

"What a business!" said Arnavielle, with a long face. "What a cursed nuisance! But no doubt you are right."

"So you are going for the police?"

"Right off? . . . Like that?"

"To notify them!"

"Very well," said the mayor, turning toward the apparitor. "Send your boy on his bicycle. It will get done more quickly. Isn't that so, Councilor? That's best, isn't it? We'll send the boy to Saint André. That is surer than the telegraph."

"Yes," said Councilor.

But the apparitor, standing directly before him, speaking only to him, asked, "So I am to go?"

"You have heard," said the master of Maubert, rising, and as if to escape their

glances, he went across to the window that overlooked the court.

The apparitor went out and, as he passed through the streets, he said to those who were anxious to learn what had been determined at the town hall, "Phew, the others would have passed the sponge. They all had cold feet. But Councilor made a speech to them. It is thus and so . . . and we are going for the police."

The police arrived at about four and went directly to Simon's, to begin their investigation.

At the end of Côte des Près, the curving roof of a low house overhung a single room that seemed crushed under the whitewashed beams of its ceiling. In this hovel, mother Simon, a weak old

woman roused to fury, raged from a bed high as a clothes-press, at one side of the room, and in another corner her son lay gasping on a straw mattress flung on the floor. The doctor, his fingers on the wrist of the wounded man, appeared to be listening to a feeble sound imperceptible to all the others present, that might have come from another world. From time to time he uncovered the whole arm and made a rapid prick in the rough, chapped skin that he washed with alcohol. An odor of earth, of ether, of old clothes, filled the room. There was no trace of blood, neither on the metal basin placed on the table nor in the linen thrown down at the foot of the bed.

"Don't bother him," said the doctor. "With two bullets in the stomach, one

doesn't stir or talk. We shall see to-morrow . . ."

Stiff on her bed, her body tipped up like a board swept away by the floods, mother Simon exhorted her visitors. "Avenge my child. . . . If they have killed him, blood shall pay for it. . . . Blood always pays. Councilor and the police will give me justice. . . . Let blood pay! Avenge my child!"

Disconcerted by the tumult of the mother and the silence of the son, the men wandered futilely about the room. Without thinking, they opened cupboards and dressers and fumbled in the linen. After five minutes they went back to the town hall and a long palaver began. The police sergeant, the mayor, the witnesses, all talked at once, interrupting

one another. Finally, Pantel was brought up to be questioned. When he entered with a crafty and insolent air, talking loudly as soon as he crossed the door-sill, Councilor left the room and began to wander through the corridors of the town hall as if it were a deserted house.

Evening came. From the upper story, to which he had retreated stairway by stairway, through the gray panes of the small windows, Councilor saw the mountain and the great slopes covered with grass or fir-trees. A humming was growing in his ears. He thought he heard the goat-bells, so quick and dancing that at each tinkle the blood rushed before his eyes, dimming the mountain and the sky. Then it seemed to him that the moun-

tain was close by and that in the valley of Mellette, in the evening mists, in the deepening shadow filled with the sound of wind and of running water, Clemence appeared. In her folded arms she carried a new-born kid, and she talked to it and bent over it to hear its breathing. Her voice sounded like the tinkling bells. Having caught sight of Councilor from a distance, she passed him with her face averted. Suddenly she disappeared and the mountain drew back into the distance. But with his forehead pressed against the panes under which the village roofs now loomed up, Councilor could not doubt that Clemence had passed. He continued to think of her who, more wild and solitary than ever, had lived entirely outside the family

ever since winter. "Now," he thought, "she talks with the beasts and passes her people without giving them a glance . . ." And still he heard the bells tinkling.

But the sound of feet, the noise of voices at the foot of the stairway, overcame the sound of the bells. Leaning over the hand-rail, Councilor saw the guards go out with Pantel. He went down behind them and found the streets deserted, the square already empty and the road that led to the bridge silent in the darkness. The crowd had followed the police, who were on their way down to Saint André.

"They are taking him away, they are taking him away!" screamed the children.

"Will you be still?" said the women, "don't make such a noise."

"It was well done," said the old men, "but, without Councilor, we should still have had him for our guard . . . Councilor! . . . He has done us a service, he has helped the town."

IV

At the same hour, alone, on the road to Maubert, Councilor was on his way back to his people.

He was walking quickly, thinking of nothing, but drawing in the cold air with great, deep breaths. He did not even hear in himself those fragments of sentences, those broken dialogues that give shape to despair. A great silence, a measureless emptiness crushed his spirit. He felt again that harassing sensation of dawn and half-sleep in which he was aware of nothing but anguish, so strongly aware that it no longer seemed to have a cause or as if it would ever end.

At the sound of his footsteps, at the murmur of his breath, he sometimes

turned back, thinking he was followed, accompanied shoulder to shoulder, by another man, who watched his gestures and the least sign of his anguish.

At each house along the road, at each farm in the valley, the light of a lamp through the leaves obtruded other presences upon him, and hastening his steps to the very limit of his strength and his breath, he seemed to flee from the spectacle of these peaceful lives.

At the bridge of Maubert, Albin was waiting, seated on a stone at the corner, leaning forward toward the sounds on the road. "Well?" he said, coming toward his father.

"Well," answered Councilor, "you were right not to go down, any of you. There is no use in showing ourselves

too much. . . . When some misfortune happens, people gather like crows. It would not do for us to behave like them."

"But what have they done since this morning?"

"The police came and arrested Pantel. Perhaps Simon will not die."

The two men walked quickly, speaking with brief words, broken sentences, as they arrived before the house. Darkness was gathering about its high façade and behind the curtains through which light filtered, shadows bent and leaned toward the road. "There they are!" whispered the women and children.

"Well," said Lucie, "so Simon is very ill? It was that Pantel who shot him?"

"Give me something to eat," answered Councilor.

"Just the same, you can't kill men like that."

"Don't heat anything. . . . I am in need of bed also . . . just something cold, and quickly. . . . Aren't the children in bed at this hour?"

"It's not so late," answered Lucie, submissively, ceasing her questions and pushing bread and sausages to the corner of the table, under the lamp, with her long hands that were still white. "It's not very late yet," she repeated, "but you have come back tired out. Well, here it is . . ."

And in the harsh light, she stretched out her bare fingers on which shone only her wedding-ring, and her animated hands opened on either side of these dead things.

Leaning against the table, his elbows spread, Councilor ate in silence and, outside the cone of light made by the lampshade, the others, silent also, seemed indifferent to time and events.

V

This melancholy indifference invaded the entire life of the Arnals, their common labor, their rest and their solitude. All day long it was like a remnant of that anguish at dawn, of which they could never get rid.

Yet they never spoke among themselves of their distress. It even seemed as if nothing had happened and that in the great family house, life was following its ancient course. This mask which they preserved before men, and which was merely their real face of other days, they also strove to preserve before one another.

But in spite of this hardening under

suffering, life for some of them became slowly unbearable. The young generation could not accept this renunciation and since, on the other hand, they could not break the tyrannical power that constrained them, they felt the desire for a new life slowly born in them.

The wives of Louis and George, two cousins who had grown up in another valley, beyond these hills and pastures, thought of the paternal farm.

In the evening, when they had put out the light and the brightness of the night pushed vainly against the shutters, in the liberating darkness, they imagined a new life.

With her mouth to her husband's cheek in a gesture of caress and confidence, Alice imposed the image of this

life on their troubled rest. Half-asleep, she would go on talking and she felt that this image, repeated in their dreams, was slowly becoming stronger and ever more present to their minds. "We can't go on living here. . . . It's all over now. . . . Let us go home. . . . Father has often asked us to come back, for a month, for a longer bit. . . . Back there we shall be freer. There are fewer people and plenty of work. . . . You will still be at home. It is the same country."

And these short, broken little sentences which came with her breath and stopped with it, so intimate, so secret, so one with the movements of her body, surrounded George with the haunting thought of another life. And the later

the hour grew, the deeper the night, the more the voice carried by that breath repeated ardently its desires. "We can't stay here any longer. We can't stay here any longer!"

Close by, Charlotte spoke of the same dream, even in those moments of pleasure when she struggled against her own cries, because of the echoing house. . . . Then she breathed against the lips that sought her own, "We must go away . . . we must go away."

During the day, when they were alone, the two women talked together of their plan. In the big kitchen, at the end of the dark hallways on the different floors, at the washing-place set up by the river, they would talk for hours, mingling their memories of childhood with

their plans for the future. Lowering their voices, bending toward each other, they whispered passionately, timidly, looking all about lest any one hear them, and when they thought they felt a presence behind them they broke off what they were saying and spoke abruptly of their work.

In great secret, each repeated these dialogues to her husband. But when all four were together, they grew embarrassed at allusions and hints. Nevertheless, little by little, they both dared to speak of these wishes to Louis and George and slowly, their eyes lowered, scratching some spot on a vest with a nail, the men yielded without answering.

Some letters exchanged, a brief visit paid by Alice to her father, confirmed

these plans for escape. The two men still swore that they could never speak of it to Councilor or to the others, when suddenly, one evening, as they were delaying to light the lamps after the evening meal, George made up his mind. "There are a great many of us here, all on top of one another. . . . Her father"—and with a brief gesture he indicated his wife, seated but her body tense, her head high, her eyes shining—"her father," he went on, "lacks help. . . . We might go over there for a while and give him a hand. And then Louis and Charlotte can also go to Charlotte's home. It's the same way there."

Councilor said nothing, nor did Albin, Louis's father or Jules, George's father. The astounded cousins turned toward the

head of the family, but the hour and the fading light made it impossible to see faces. They merely heard through the twilight the heavy, rapid breathing of the older Arnal, and the quick puffs of air from between his closed teeth. At every one of George's sentences they all expected an outburst, an imperiously violent reply . . .

"Whenever you like," Councilor said at last, rising.

At harvest time the two young households left Maubert. This departure was never talked about in the family, but the example had been set, and now the taste for a new way of living, the need to make a new life for themselves, haunted the young people.

Not long after, two young boys,—cousins of another branch who had married daughters of Jules and Samuel—went away in their turn. There was no explanation. Their farewells were even simpler and more brutal than the others. "We are going to work in the valley," they said. "Perhaps we shall come back some day . . ."

VI

THEN Maubert took on the appearance of a dead town. The equilibrium which had maintained an active life between the buildings and the men was destroyed. The empty buildings crushed them all with their mass, and those who lived in their shade seemed to await the coming of some new catastrophe.

Already briars and weeds were advancing to the foot of the walls. A wild and brutally fertile nature sprang up in field and forest, urged on by sun and wind. It snatched back from the Arnals this land that they had ploughed, fertilized, and ruled for their livelihood.

On the slopes in the immediate fore-

ground, the fields were still cultivated, cut by scythes and pickaxes into exact rectangles, into long, regular strips, but back of them, at the edge of the forest, underbrush overgrew the paths and on all sides the outskirts of Maubert yielded to the surrounding waste. On the south side of the farm, in the full sun, under the high façade with its blocked-up windows, the path that followed the canal was choked with weeds and briars, and from the bottom of the water long plants rose toward the bank, born by the current and moving with it.

At times when Councilor passed along this blind wall and skirted the canal, opening or closing the gates, his legs scratched by thorns and thistles, he would stop abruptly at this disorderly

appearance of his property, saying, "Remorse will kill us."

But at the same instant he would reject the idea with a strong gesture of his arm or a powerful movement of his head; for him it was only an empty formula. He knew well that remorse was not the cause of this catastrophe which was destroying Maubert in a year, as empires are destroyed in a thousand. On the contrary, its great keenness was a sign of vigorous life, the revolt of the heart and the mind seeking for their lost purity. This remorse helped them to live. Councilor, in his old age, was evoking new strength in himself. Each morning when he awoke he clung to this suffering as if it restored to him the serenity of his best years. In the terrible judg-

ment that each day brought he felt the joy of beginning an expiation. For a moment he believed that through these struggles of conscience he might win back his life, he hoped by this means to recover his strength.

If at these moments remorse had been able to command his entire devotion and activity, he might, perhaps, have been born again, but other forces shaped his life and that of his sons, dominated their remorse and prevented it from being expressed.

The moral regency that they had used to exercise over men still existed, as the buildings of Maubert still existed, the long farmhouse, the tall dwelling and the square barn. It was all-powerful, and in spite of their desire to mix no more

with other men, to live only for an inner expiation, it remained the master of their lives. Created by their strength and their united wills, it now had its own existence and imposed its tyranny upon them. Each day they yielded to it a little more, and with altered hearts still were forced to do what they had used to do when they believed in themselves.

VII

At this moment when the Arnals no longer felt the strength to fulfill their rôles as directors of conscience, when they sought to withdraw from these duties that were no longer their sole intense interest, the time for the re-election of the Municipal Council arrived.

Among all the obligations that bound Councilor to the men of the land, his municipal function seemed that which summed up and overtopped all the others.

Two months before the election, Councilor had begun to say with childish obstinacy, "I shall not run again . . . I have passed the age-limit."

People laughed with an incredulous

air and no one believed in this retirement.

Councilor persisted, but not violently or forcibly. On his side, it seemed like a patient supplication by which he hoped to move people. But no one could believe that the master of Maubert was really begging to be allowed to retire. So, when it was time to draw up the list—the list which, almost unchanged, had been elected over and over for twenty years—he came down to town to get his name scratched off. But they were waiting for him at the town hall, where they had already inscribed his name at the top of the list, and amid all the congratulations and handclasps he did not have the courage to dispute it, but let it go for one time more.

There was no campaign, no reunion, for these elections. Usually on the morning of election-day Councilor and the other candidates were the first to arrive at the town hall, as they called it. The mayor who was going out presided. Councilor was the first to vote, and throughout the whole day remained close to the hall, shaking hands and talking with those who had come to the polls.

The whole population of the commune filed past him, in their Sunday clothes, in small groups. The men from Trabuc were the only ones who did not come to town to vote. Because of the distance and the bad roads they had a voting-booth in a house in their own village. That year, for the first time, Councilor did not appear at the opening of the town hall.

"He is getting old, for a fact," people said, taking their ballots.

All day long, not one of the Arnals came down to the town. "There are not very many of them up there these days, the work is detaining them," said those who came out from the town hall.

However, toward half-past five, Councilor and Albin arrived. They were pushed into the polling-station and lost in the crowd. Every one moved toward the square, the old men gathered in the big hall; under the arbor they were drinking beer and lemonade. The young men invited the girls who had been walking about to join them, and when the latter sat down by them on the wooden benches they went into great bursts of laughter and gave the men digs

with their elbows, crying, "But you haven't voted, perhaps."

"Yes, yes, whom did you vote for?"

"For Councilor!" cried the girls in their shrill voices.

At six o'clock the ballot closed, the box was turned over and they began counting the votes. Not one of the Arnals was in the room. Councilor had disappeared half an hour before and Albin was walking about under the trees, paying no heed to those who called and beckoned to him to come and take his place at the counting.

"He is ahead!" you could hear them cry in the town hall, out of the circle of bent shoulders. "He is ahead: another for him, and another for him."

Some men ran to friends of the Ar-

nals, thinking they would find Councilor there. In a few minutes they returned with him and, as they came before the town hall, the mayor, standing solemnly in the doorway, holding his spectacles in one hand and lifting a sheet of paper up to the light, was finishing reading the results. They heard a buzzing and a rapid, monotonous recitation, then certain words at which the voice of Arnavielle rose: "Voters, 295; votes for Arnal, 283."

With a shout so sudden that it seemed to spring from their very movement, those who were crowded into the big hall or pressed together at the door turned back to the square. They caught sight of Councilor, and the crowd formed a half-circle about him, shout-

ing, waving their arms, repeating the result of the ballot.

"283 votes!"

"There is no need to wait for the figures from Trabuc."

"283 votes!"

The other candidates were far behind Councilor. A gust of discontent with the entire council, that had been in office too long, had endangered the list, and only Arnal's presence had caused it to be elected. But his triumph gave to all, even to his adversaries, a sense of victory.

All the men talked at once, crowding and jostling, but some were already breaking away, and approaching Councilor, they took his hands. "You have all the votes!"

"Every one was for you, only thirteen

votes against you in the whole countryside."

"And perhaps among them was your own," said a laughing voice.

"Like enough!" returned twenty voices, made all the more sonorous by bursts of laughter.

"You have the whole commune."

"If the old man at Haut-des-Prés had been able to get down, you would have had one vote more. He has lamented all day from his bed."

"Simon came down, with his stomach all tied up. You can count on his vote."

In the midst of these cries, these shovings, this friendly tumult, Councilor remained motionless, his face relaxed, the features sagging.

"Do you remember your first elec-

tion?" asked a beardless old man with the small head of a timid child. "That was the deuce of a fight. You didn't win by much. 'If you follow that republican . . .!' said the other side. They held the country in those days. And now you have all the votes!"

"You must give us a speech!" cried the men in the back rows of the crowd.

"Yes, yes, speech!"

Councilor did not stir. His face furrowed, his mouth slack, he seemed to be still waiting, waiting for something besides his triumph.

Then up above the square, in the narrow streets of the quarter, there sounded a band.

"The men from Trabuc! The men from Trabuc!"

"Here they are! Here they are!"

At the top of the steps, above the church, appeared a flag and heads that moved forward, singing and swaying.

The men of Trabuc, perched high on the mountain, were considered the best singers and the best musicians in the country. Although in town it was never possible to keep alive for long the "Philharmonics" that they organized there, in the hamlet there were always five or six musicians who could play for dancing and who came down to the town for celebrations, improvising a brass-band.

So they were coming down from the upper quarter, bringing the result of the ballot, and marching behind their flag with hautboys, a cornet and two drums. They were playing a shrill dance-air, a

political farandole, jaunty, ironic, setting their victory and their joy to measured rhythm:

"Quand la merle saute au pré,
Hausse la queue, hausse la queue;
Quand la merle saute au pré,
Hausse la queue, baisse le nez."

Then to the rolling of the drums and the thin notes of the hautboys:

"Ô République,
Toute petite,
Laisse toi escamoter,
Laisse toi faire,
Que peut te faire
Cette bande de curés."

The musicians marched out into the square and circled it, and the entire crowd, the girls on the arms of the boys,

followed the music, skipping and performing a farandole behind the flag.

"Ô République,
Toute petite . . ."

Then, all at once, the music stopped, the song seemed to hang suspended in the air, the dance broke up.

"Hurrah for Councilor!"

The guard of Trabuc gave the result of the ballot to the mayor: "Trabuc: voters, 49; votes, 49; Arnal, 49."

"Bravo! Hurrah for Trabuc!"

"Hurrah for the Rep. . . ."

"Hurrah for Councilor!"

The entire crowd stamped, like a lot of children, and the noise it made rose to the open windows where little groups were gathered, clapping their hands and stamping their feet. But in the midst of

this confusion of cries and movements, it seemed to Councilor that he stood alone. This impression of solitude was suddenly so strong that he made several movements of the head and shoulders such as he made when he talked to himself hidden from the eyes of all. He frowned, hooked his thumbs into his vest, and assumed the air of inner questioning that men wear only in secret, for it betrays too much of their heart.

"Ah, youth," he thought, "youth that can always begin a new life!"

But as suddenly as he had thought himself alone, he now saw around him joyous, surprised faces and felt hands grasping his own. "Don't press about him so," cried some one. "You will stifle him."

"The pleasure, the surprise . . . let him breathe a little."

"Don't push so, in back!"

But Councilor, coming to himself, thought only of getting away, of being alone. He had grasped Albin's arm in the crowd and slowly, with the obstinacy of a child, he dragged him out of the square.

The music began again. At the Café de la Mairie the apparitor lighted the Venetian lanterns and the servant set out chairs and tables. Dancing girls and boys pushed the crowd back into the corners of the square. The musicians from Trabuc had drawn up under the arbor and played mountain airs, keeping time with the marches and dances by stamping their feet.

"Come, come," said Councilor, "let's get out of this. I don't know what I'm doing any more." Slipping from group to group, the two men reached the deserted street. Between the houses with their closed doors and dark windows, they walked more rapidly, crossed the bridge and, once on the road, found themselves back in the night again.

Behind him, the improvised festival and the little town seemed very small. It was as if a music-box were grinding out its shrill little tune in the darkness.

Walking rapidly, the two men reached silence. They plunged into it and found new strength there as well as in the cold air that rose from the fields. At every step the sound of brooks, the murmur of water under rocks, the sigh of the wind

in the grasses created this silence all about them. It became vaster and deeper until from the head of the valley, like a suddenly interrupted noise, came the roar of the high waterfalls of Mellette.

"We can never escape other people," thought Councilor as he walked. "I shall not have even one month's peace before my death."

He went on, walking less steadily than usual, bending his torso at each stride, swinging his body as if it were a pendulum, and, with each swing, getting clearer ideas, plainer thoughts than he had had in months. "Misfortune is upon us. We go on with our life but our hearts are changed . . . and nothing changes in our life . . . each duty becomes too heavy. . . ."

Albin too, following a little behind his father, treading on his heels and moving abruptly to the left, then, after a few steps, coming back behind him again, Albin thought like an echo, as if in secret accord, "Misfortune is upon us. . . ."

But, having passed the footbridge and the rocky slope, they were arriving at Maubert. To them, this return had a profound symbolic import. They were going to be alone with each other again. They were going to meet the severest judgment that could be brought against them and, though the whole family was braced in a heroic complicity, they were to read this judgment in the eyes of each one of them.

And in this new solitude, in these big

rooms that now seemed empty, the welcome of the men, women and children, in order to overcome this tension, took on a solemn air. The greetings exchanged, the emptiness of these walls that crushed all gestures, the silence that swallowed up every sentence, all became ceremonious, as if there were danger of lacking in respect, as if a dead soul had been present in the room.

The absence of Clemence, who no longer took even her meals with the family, increased the feeling that haunted them, and yet each word, each gesture strove to hide these contradictory emotions that blended in the one confused despair.

"Well," said the women, "it's over now?"

"It's over," said Albin. "They have elected him again."

"Well," said the women, "they might have left him in peace. . . . But it makes no difference, things go on just as they always have. . . ."

As usual, Councilor ate at the corner of the table, crushing his bread against his thumb, and as usual the women pushed the children up the wooden stairs and toward their rooms. They whispered "hush" through closed lips and, gesticulating a little, walking on tiptoe, they acted as if they would like to take the noise of their shoes in their hands and stifle it gently. . . .

VIII

THEN there were two new departures, one after another, two more empty places: two cousins who had to perform their military service got the date advanced, and left for Algeria.

So, little by little, all the young men left Maubert. Those who remained struggled desperately to keep up with the work on the place. Grown indifferent to their moral supremacy, after having sacrificed everything to save it, they wished at least to salvage the work of so many generations, this material conquest of the family, this kingdom made up of vineyards, of rye, of alfalfa, of trees

pruned or marked for cutting, set out everywhere on the slopes of the mountain with the complicity of the earth and the sun.

But toward the end of summer, the increase in the work suddenly exceeded their strength. The grape-gathering, the fruit crops, the last reaping and the first sowing seemed to overwhelm them like the pouring out of a great cornucopia. They set out at dawn, they returned at evening, and yet the work was still unfinished. They got out of breath running after the season, trying to keep up with it, yet each day they did the necessary work a little less completely.

And in the evening, climbing up along the echoing stairway, Councilor, crushed with fatigue, scratching his neck, bend-

ing his head, at each landing disputed and struggled with himself against a decision. "Never in our lives!" he would say in a loud voice. "We shall manage by ourselves."

But having reached the door of his room, he would delay before turning the handle and thus allow Albin to come up to him, when, turning toward him, he would continue his monologue out loud: "We shall manage by ourselves. . . . It is better to kill ourselves with work."

Albin would not answer but would slowly spread his arms in a harassed gesture and enter his room.

The next day, they had to begin again, to reap, to drag baskets, to knock down fruit, to spade up the earth. Heavy work,

never-ended, renewed like the fruits of the earth, put an end to all thought.

One evening, before his half-open door, looking at Albin and Arthur bent double, leaning their dark faces, drawn with fatigue, against the hand-rail, Councilor said, "We shall never get through. . . . To-morrow we must get two farm-hands from town. . . ."

"It is better than to lose the crops," said Albin.

So, for the first time in centuries, two farm-hands were engaged for Maubert.

They arrived with the distrustful and timid air of strangers, speaking little, eating barely enough to satisfy their hunger, asking constantly what they were to do. They were two men, about thirty, who had come from another valley and

did not know the Arnals but who had heard talk of Maubert, "one of the finest farms in our mountains," as it was called.

They looked in amazement on these powerful men whose servants they had become only a few hours before, who were ridden with work and left no freedom except in their sleep. They were astonished at their air of sadness, of distraction.

IX

AFTER several weeks, when work in the fields was almost over, the two farm-hands began to wander about Maubert and its outbuildings. They had a little dog, clever and thieving, who ran about, after them, sniffing, and who was accustomed, as they were, to getting his living from strangers. The Arnals had not even noticed this mongrel water-spaniel, its eyes hidden under its hair, which on the very first day had slunk away from the dogs on the farm, had refused to fight, and had kept itself out of their sight.

When, during their leisure hours, the

two men wandered about the farm, hunting for mushrooms or hollows in the grass for a nap, the dog followed them, running about in concentric circles.

One morning, as they were passing along the barn wall, on the upland, the spaniel stopped at a little mound of dried grass and, barking furiously, began to attack the earth with his paws.

"What's the matter?" they said, and pulling at his collar, kicking him with their boots, they tried to drag him away. But whining, stretched flat on his belly, his ears back, and still scratching, he would not budge.

"Well, what is it?" they said, stopping also.

Skilled at digging, the animal went down into the earth like a rat. The two

men waited, crouching on their heels. After a moment they became aware of a sweetish and penetrating odor, no doubt that which had attracted the animal. Full of curiosity, they leaned over the hole, scooped out the earth that bothered the dog, and urged on his search. Finally they heard his hard, quick nails scratching on wood. A shovel lay on the slope. They ran to get it, enlarged the hole and in a few minutes freed the box. The dog had lain down by the hole, panting, playing dead, one eye open, a leg cocked over his ear.

Having lifted the box up gently and quickly pried it open, a mass of rotted cloth unrolled of itself and the child's body showed under the mould. A small arm emerged from the sack and the

forehead rose so distinctly under a thin layer of cloth that they could see the dip above the nose and the hollows of the temples. . . . Jumping back, their open hands thrust out as if to protect themselves, the men let the box drop in the full sunlight. The edge of the half pulled-off cover broke the light and cast a line of shadow alongside the body, but the heap of cloth and flesh was flooded with light and, in the sudden warmth, seemed already to stretch out like a living thing.

With long, stealthy steps, half turning back, and watching the box out of the corner of their eyes, the farm-hands went down to the farm, talking in low voices. In the inner court, which happened to be deserted at this moment,

they continued their dialogue, their heads together, now and then raising their voices and gripping each other as if they were disputing.

"No, no, no, we can't keep that to ourselves . . . and this isn't the place to speak of it. . . ."

"Go to the devil, I don't want a lot of trouble."

Finally, one of them, the younger, the one called Lacanau, set out for the town at a run.

At the Café de la Mairie the leading men of the town were at table, and the farm-hand came up to them, panting, persistent, secretive, like some one looking for help.

"Are you Monsieur the Mayor?" he asked each of them.

"Look, there he is, at that table," said the men.

Lacanau took the mayor aside and whispered mysteriously in his ear.

"What's this you're telling me?" exclaimed that old landowner, who had the face of a man-of-law, "what's this you've come to tell me?"

Leaving the farm-hand in the middle of the square, Arnavielle, excited, returned to the group with his news. In a minute it made the rounds of the café and brought in all the men who were moving about the square.

"He has found a dead child behind Maubert," they repeated.

"How's that? What does Councilor say about it?"

"He says that Councilor knows noth-

ing about it. He says the child is in a box, back of Maubert."

In a corner of the arbor, the men whispered together, pulling the mayor by the sleeve. "Go and see. Perhaps one of them has done it. We don't know them well. . . . They aren't from about here."

"Go and see Councilor."

The mayor, who was exasperated by this new affair and who had to go down to Saint Jean in the afternoon, could not make up his mind. He grumbled and hunched his shoulders.

"Councilor can manage all that himself."

But some offered to go with him to Maubert. The apparitor had made the rounds of the group and he came back

to him, saying, "Come on, here are four others who will come with us. . . . The least we can do is to take the trouble. . . ."

Finally, they made up their minds and set out, six all told, with the mayor and the farm-hand. On the road, they scattered, the strongest going ahead, Arnavielle walking in front with the stride of a man used to going about large estates.

As they made the last turn, Councilor observed them from his doorway and, suspecting nothing but with a heart dilated with solemn anguish, he went to await them by the foot-bridge, at the edge of his property.

"Pardon our coming," they exclaimed as they arrived, speaking all together

with a noise that drowned most of their words, "but they say that they have found a box with a dead child in it. We came to see about it with you. Again our excuses."

Councilor's face became that of a man who wakens suddenly, who rouses himself from sleep, with pain and suffering of the flesh. Opening his eyes, hardening his features, he seemed to perceive an unknown world, a new horizon which was no longer that of all the other mornings of his life.

Finally, master of the least wrinkle of his lips or forehead, master also of his voice, he said authoritatively, "Yes, don't hunt for any one. I am the one who did it."

Astounded, overwhelmed by an oc-

currence that none of them would ever have imagined, the assembled men had nothing to say. The last-comers broke into the half-circle that had formed about Councilor, asked a question in a low voice, and at the brief reply fell themselves into that same terrified silence.

They stared at one another and at Councilor, and several began sentences that they could not finish. To put an end to it, they went up behind the barn. In the harsh autumn sunlight the open box, lying on the slope, stank horribly. Above it stirred a green mass, a swarm of flies, among which fluttered the white wings of butterflies.

None of these men could have believed Councilor's brutal assertion, but

the horror of this spectacle, which in itself could have accused no one, convinced them immediately.

They turned back at once and at each step this event, that had suddenly taken its place among visible things, seemed to shatter the world around them.

All the windows of Maubert were closed, as at the first gust of a storm. In the darkened rooms women were weeping, while slow, cadenced steps, like those of pall-bearers, sounded along the stairs where four men were carrying Lucie, who had just fainted.

Alone before his door, Councilor waited, motionless. "Go and notify the police," he said to the mayor, "do what is necessary. I have said all that I am going to say. I am the guilty one. You will never know any more."

All the men had taken off their black hats and balanced them on the tips of their fingers. All the working vests were buttoned up like Sunday vests.

"Arrest me," Councilor said.

"As if I could!" said the mayor.

Councilor was calm and determined, though never had he seemed so old or so feeble. He no longer appeared to live except by a desperate act of will, weak but inflexible, and seemingly independent of his body. Those who were there said, later, that he spoke as do pious folk about to die. . . .

To all these men the event remained incomprehensible. But they still bent before the will of Councilor. They accepted it when he accused himself as when he accused others.

Not knowing what to do, they went back to town. Every one was waiting for them, people were already talking about "the crime of the farm-hands" and wondering which of the Maubert children it was.

Those who came back from the mountain let the truth be known. They said that no one could tell yet but they repeated Councilor's words and they spoke of the open box, the dead child, and the terrible appearance of Maubert.

The mayor secretly notified the police of Saint Jean, as on the day when Councilor had had Pantel arrested.

The news re-echoed from house to house, through all the town and valley. People spoke to one another on the street, went into one another's houses

without knocking, formed in groups.

"It isn't one of the Maubert children they found?"

"No, it's a new-born infant. . . ."

"Councilor takes all the blame upon himself!"

A thousand details rose up suddenly in their memory. They remembered Clemence's disappearance, they spoke of Maurice's departure, they recalled all those who had left Maubert during the year, and they found all the evidences of a curse so inexplicable no one had ever dreamed of it. Combet remembered Councilor's gesture the day he had had Pantel arrested, and some even invented other details and gave a half-imaginary account of the affair.

But these too exact explanations re-

volted most of them and men, with the approval of the crowd, would stop the story-teller by saying rudely, "You know all about it? Then why do you go on talking? Perhaps it was a little bastard born dead. Of what can Councilor be accused? He has never injured any one."

In this confusion, events followed one another rapidly. They rose like a great wave toward Maubert, toward that lonely dwelling perched high before the eyes of all at the top of the valley, almost above the earth. Then they rushed back, each time more violent, more tragic, and swept furiously through the town.

In a few hours they saw the police go up to Maubert, the public prosecutor

and all his officers. After a rapid investigation they went back to Saint Jean, without even stopping at the town. But the policemen who stayed behind had orders to arrest Councilor.

All this was known and repeated at once. From every farmhouse, from every field, they watched the lofty dwelling as men watch a ship at sea. They learned at once what Councilor had told the judges; they learned also that he had made Albin keep silent and that, with terrible violence, he had declared that he alone was guilty.

"A little bastard of Clemence's," people whispered.

"It might have died anyway."

"Shame has driven him insane. He is over-conscientious."

They knew also that, surrounded by all the women of the family, propped up on her bed and gasping for breath, Lucie was dying in her room.

Certain others said also that they had seen Clemence, carefree, lying in the midst of her goats in the valley of Mellette, her face upturned to heaven under the flying clouds.

At each piece of news a deeper emotion filled all hearts with despair and loneliness. But it found no words of expression; it remained hesitating and secret. No one yet had the courage to pass judgment on the drama that set Councilor and the whole Arnal family apart from the world. Each one merely felt that he had lost a strength, a pride, a

support, and something began to be lacking in this community which till then had lived contentedly a harsh, economical, prudent life.

But when Councilor left Maubert, between the two policemen, who drew back and walked at a respectful distance from him, a cry rang across town and valley: "They are coming down, they are coming down with him."

Then, in spite of the first movement of curiosity that had brought them to their door-steps, they caught their children by the hand, and, pulling them in violently, shut themselves up and barricaded their windows.

In an instant the town was deserted. The dust of a dry autumn alone floated palely above it. A solemn reverence filled

this solitude. It seemed the monumental decree of an emotion that filled all hearts, of the despair that seizes man when he feels an ancient faith about to crumble.

The town as yet refused to shatter this belief of man in man under which it had lived for so long. But the faithful and patient hearts that had kept it alive did not know how to overcome the power of events; they bent before them and nothing came to help them in their anguish.

So when Councilor, between the two policemen, crossed the Place de la Mairie, an old woman, bent and limping, came out of a doorway and pulled at his vest, lifting her face up toward him.

"Tell me, Councilor, about the claim that I have made; you know, about that pension for my old age that I must get out of them; whom must I write to now?"

Councilor turned toward this old face, this straggling hair, as white as his own and now brushing his elbow, the astonished eyes with which all men turn toward dawn and the rebirth of day over the world.

The old woman went on talking, leaning on his arm. She was timid and confiding. . . .

Twenty steps ahead of them the little town hall stood forth with its air of an old manor. A whole world, sure of itself and well-ordered, lay about it: the fields clinging to the mountain, the roads

and brooks, the town's shops and the houses with their closed windows behind which men, leaning forward, watched the square.

"You must . . ." said Councilor.

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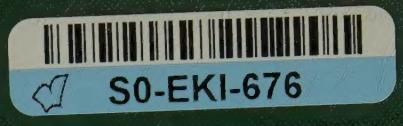
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